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THE DIPPERS

NEW EDITION

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THE DIPPERS

BY

BEN TRAVERS

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TO
LAURENCE IRVING

THE DIPPERS

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CHAPTER I

ON a pleasant evening in summer, Mr. Henry Talboyes, solicitor, of London, bade farewell to his client, Miss Starchfield, at the gate of that lady's Dorsetshire retreat, and set off upon a cross-country walk to the small outlying station of Mellingham. He had made a note of a main-line train calling at the more convenient depot of Coombe Puddy, but his business with Miss Starchfield had detained him longer than he had anticipated. Talboyes, however, assured his hostess that the prospect of a lengthy stroll in the sweet air of the country lanes was very agreeable.

A less amenable man might have paused to make inquiries concerning the large touring car in the garage at the back of the house and the chauffeur who must almost have forgotten how to drive. The owner of the car contented herself with issuing directions as to how Mellingham was to be reached via the fields; and the solicitor set out with a heavy Gladstone bag and a suppressed sigh.

Miss Starchfield was one of those wealthy and parsimonious county ladies who occupy houses several sizes too large for them, and who turn for amusement to the bullying of poor female relations. She seldom invited one of the latter to Coombe Puddy, but she exercised a rigid discipline over them by correspondence.

The poor female relations were, as is usual in such cases, ladies of particularly tractable natures. They vied in anxious perjuries on the subject of the tyrant's health, and never failed to observe the successive anniversaries of her birth with insipid letters of congratulation and ill-afforded gifts, which the recipient invariably designated as hideous and futile.

Whenever a poor relation offended Miss Starchfield, that lady employed a swift and subtle method of subduing the unruly spirit—a system of punishment by suggestion worthy of an Oriental potentate. She sent for Mr. Talboyes. That was all. In the eyes of the Starchfield retainers that most amiable of men had long assumed the part of a Bloody Bill to the acrimonious Pirate Chief who ruled their destinies.

“Mr. Talboyes spent the day with me last Thursday”—Rosie or Amelia would receive the information and would lose no time in rubbing it into Jane, whose first-born, Cuthbert, was known to have committed an unpardonable breach. But it must be con-

ceded to the old tyrant that when Jane had bowed the knee, remonstrated successfully with Cuthbert and expressed full contrition and apology, Mr. Talboyes spent another day with Aunt Lucy, and the delinquent was understood to have saved her bacon.

Miss Starchfield was easily offended. Talboyes was always at Coombe Puddy. Indeed, the family was often racked with doubt and apprehension as to whether any particular visit was punitive or salutary. Amelia had even been known to take the bold step of going and pumping Mr. Talboyes in his office. But, though she found him to be a most sympathetic and yielding gentleman, she failed to gain any decisive information.

Truth to tell, Talboyes was himself utterly subjugated by the forceful personality of his best client, and would have been haunted by her avenging figure had he dared to divulge the least of her intentions. Meanwhile, having already made and remade Miss Starchfield's will a score of times, he was probably never quite certain at any given time as to what had been the decisions arrived at during the last visit to the country.

On this particular summer evening then, Talboyes started forth across the fields into the lane said to lead to Mellingham. He had ample time for his train, but the evening was very warm, and the Gladstone bag was heavy with notes relating to a recent

and penal aberration on the part of Sylvia, and absolutions following the contrition of Harriet. Moreover, the bag itself evinced a new and deplorable tendency to burst open at inconvenient moments.

Talboyes paused for breath and set down upon a bank. The sweet air of the country lanes proved utterly unresponsive to his flattery. He was stout. He possessed an over-confidence in his own physical abilities, or perhaps it should be said that he lacked the spirit to tell Miss Starchfield that he would be blowed if he walked, and that, if she was going to alter her will three times a quarter, she could jolly well trot her car out. But Talboyes was unfortunately disposed to be rather deferential and conciliatory in his dealings with others, especially with ladies.

He sat on the bank and cursed this admirable trait of his nature. Whatever his failings, it must be said he had fully acknowledged them to himself every day of his life. He admitted and deplored his inherent docility. He realized that the indecision of manner and nervous hesitation of speech so noticeable in his intercourse were justly regarded as indicative of a weak and yielding character. He knew full well how unfavourably he compared with some men of his acquaintance—men of commanding personality, men warranted to stir even Miss Starchfield's chauffeur into a sense of duty. Then he re-

flected on the strange fact that such men seemed invariably to harbour a grievance.

Talboyes often had a grievance, but he never harboured one.' The grievance was generally attributable to his own ineptitude and would not bear harbouring. The other men, too, seemed always to be engaged in furious altercations with each other. Talboyes had not an enemy in the world. And this perhaps was due to the fact that he savoured the mortifications produced by his own mild forbearance with the saving grace of an unconquerable sense of humour.

Unconquerable even now, when he turned from cursing at himself to laughing at himself; unconquerable, when a glance at his watch warned him that he must be again on the move. The short breather had completely restored his customary good humour. He arose and stretched his limbs. He took up his Gladstone bag. It flew open and distributed Miss Starchfield's will in several directions. Talboyes failed to notice until that moment that there was after all quite a considerable breeze. He had to climb into a field where there was a bull to regain Harriet's confession.

Bathed in perspiration, Talboyes presently pursued his way through the dusty lanes, and sighed for a sight of the streets of London congested with taxicabs. Here he looked in vain for any sign of a

conveyance. So desolate was the view that he could scarcely believe the object of his haste was a train with its complement of human passengers. Now he halted, doubting that he could be on the right road. The hopeless lane dragged itself wearily onwards, apparently to nowhere. The horizon betrayed no sign of a village, and as for a railway station—

The railway station of Mellingham was not strictly speaking at Mellingham, but was situated nearly two miles from the public house and the few rows of cottages which constituted the village. The reason for this was, in the opinion of Old Noony, the oldest inhabitant, that Mellingham was expected to extend as far as the station “before”—as he rather pessimistically expressed it—“she gets finished off of.” The place, he said, had already doubled in size within his remembrance. Up to the present, however, Mellingham had steadily refused to patronize the railway. The majority of the villagers were swayed by a conservative mistrust of any means of progression swifter than a market cart. A few took an occasional railway journey in the spirit which was influencing more enlightened persons to travel by aeroplane.

Every morning and evening a train halted at the station, vainly calling upon the inhabitants to be borne eastwards and to sample the delights of the great and wicked metropolis; but it was found that

one aged porter sufficed to regulate the passenger traffic. He himself still entertained vague suspicions of the railway, having been brought up to regard it as a comparatively modern improvement, but he enjoyed the autocracy of his rule at the station, where he first served out any tickets that might be required from a small tin enclosure in the station yard, and afterwards walked round to clip them at a little gate communicating with the platform. Somewhere in the background were a signalman and a small boy, and in the back parlour of the Plough Inn was a station master; but the porter was the acknowledged representative of law and order at Mellingham station.

On this particular summer evening he had mustered an unusually large number of persons to undergo the ordeal of passing the platform gate. A youth and his lady friend, with bicycles gaily ornamented with dead wild flowers, were causing him considerable trouble. At the critical moment the youth could only display his bicycle tickets, and was attempting to argue that these provided proof that his passenger tickets must necessarily exist. A party, consisting of an old woman, a younger woman and a little boy who carried a box-kite, stood awaiting their turn, racked by the agitation which only an approaching train can impart to the female breast. For the train was due and could be heard across the valley; while

far in the distance, farther it seemed than the train itself, could be descried the figure of a man with a bag running against hope.

An observer, lingering in the shadow of the converted cow-shed which served as a waiting-room at Mellingham station, would have witnessed a capital finish, but the train just won. Perhaps Talboyes was not strictly justified in his assertion that the kite was the deciding factor. At all events what took place was as follows.

When the cyclist found his tickets—which were in his cap—the porter dropped his clippers, stood on them, and wondered where they had got to. This enraged the elder of the two ladies in the background, who, as her companion had already informed the company, had “bad feet and a tin trunk”. She abandoned her supplications and assumed a dictatorial manner. She told the porter what she thought of him. What she thought of him was that he was an old fool. This created an argument, which was only drowned by the noise of the train, as it steamed into the station.

The cyclists made their escape, but the other party was less lucky. At the critical moment the small boy injudiciously allowed his box-kite to get completely out of control. The kite executed a short circuit, unwinding yards of string from the ball in the hand of its owner. The string wound itself in coils round

the old lady's extremities, between her bad feet and over her tin trunk. Infuriated and struggling, she was finally rescued, borne away and pushed into a carriage by the guard; but at the sacrifice of the kite, which was abandoned in the confusion and remained in the centre of the cinder track before the cow-shed. The carriage door was loudly slammed upon the party, the guard's whistle sounded, and the train, with an exasperating air of inexorable deliberation, steamed laboriously away.

No passengers had alighted at Mellingham, and the porter, having closed the platform gate, began cautiously to wind in the kite by the abbreviated length of string which it still retained. At the same moment Talboyes, panting with exhaustion and vainly endeavouring to muster breath for a shout, came dashing through the station yard, put his foot clean through the box-kite and bit the dust. From his hand flew the unfortunate bag, and from the bag flew all the combined present, past and future of Amelia, of Jane, of Harriet and of Rosie.

"Damn!" said Talboyes.

"'Ere, 'ere, 'ere," cried the porter, in a protesting crescendo. "Be careful, can't ye?"

"Careful—I like that," said Talboyes.

"Ay, careful," reiterated the aged porter. "Do ye think that 'ere kite was put there for you to go kicking to bits?"

"Confound your kite!" replied Talboyes, attempting to free his one captured foot with the other. "What the dickens do you mean by playing with your kite in the middle of a railway station?"

The porter nodded, as though admitting his error.

"Ay," he said. "A'al put 'er away as soon as you take yer foot off of 'er."

"But I never heard of such a thing. Porters flying kites——"

"Aa warn't flying 'er."

"No, but you were trying to."

"A'a warn't."

"You were."

"Noo, aa warn't."

"You were, porter. Are you a porter?"

"Ay."

"You are? I thought so. Well, porter, you were."

"A'a warn't."

"Nonsense. I distinctly saw you pulling the kite along the ground and giving it twitches."

"Wull, why didn't ye stap?"

"Stop?" cried Talboyes, on his knees, attempting to reclaim his scattered papers. "Do you imagine that I have expended all this energy in order to stand and watch some particularly feeble kite-flying? Help me to pick these papers up."

"I think some of 'em got blowed away," remarked the porter, assisting without enthusiasm.

Talboyes scrambled to his feet and began to dust himself.

"That's more than is ever likely to happen to your infernal kite," he said, still indignant at being victimized in such an outrageous manner and at such an inconvenient moment.

The most scrupulous man would have found it difficult not to lay the blame for the lost train on the shoulders of the porter and his inopportune toy. The most long-suffering would have had a struggle to curb his wrath. But it is unlikely that such paragons are gifted with a sense of the ridiculous. By the time Talboyes had finished removing cinder track from his clothing, a smile of suppressed amusement had already made its appearance on his face, and he watched the old porter grunting over his task of collecting papers with something like a chuckle. Here, at any rate, thought Talboyes, was a personality on whom he could practise that air of authority, the lack of which he so frequently found cause to deplore. The porter, however, continued to regard the whole incident in the most off-hand manner. He stuffed about two-thirds of the papers haphazard into the Gladstone bag and arose dusting his horny hands.

"Ay. That's aboot the lot," he said.

"About the lot!" exclaimed Talboyes. "I'll have you know that those are very important business documents."

"Then ye ought to have a business bag," said the porter. "This ain't a good bag in my opinion. It's weak at the harsp."

"The what?"

"The harsp."

"The harsp?"

"Ay, the harsp."

"Not so weak as you are in the head," said Talboyes with acerbity. "What train was that just now?"

"Why that were the Lunnion train."

"Damn!" said Talboyes. "When's the next?"

"There ain't another," replied the porter casually, attempting as he spoke to close the bag, which immediately burst open again. "There, Aa told 'ee it were weak at the harsp."

"You must be a rotten porter if you can't manage a simple bag."

"Ay, a simple bag—it is that," said the porter.

Talboyes stiffened. He felt bound in the interests of the travelling public to exercise the Prussian manner with this contumacious native. "Pick all those papers up at once," he said, "and then tell me about these trains. Is that the last train to London?"

"There's more to-morrow," said the porter.

"Is that the last train to-night?"

"Ay, it is that. Leastways it ain't. But it's the last 'un from 'ere."

"It *is* the last?"

"Ay, there's a fast 'un later."

"Oh, there *is* a fast one later?"

"Ay, there's a fast 'un later."

"Stopping here?"

"Noo, 'e don't stap 'ere."

"Well, where does it stop?" shouted Talboyes, riled beyond measure.

"Wull, 'e don't stap. 'E's a fast 'un."

"Oh, confound this!" Talboyes beat the cinder track with an impatient foot. "Where does it start from?"

"Start fram?" echoed the porter raising his head slowly and surveying the distant horizon with a speculative gaze. "Oh, somewheres away down."

"But it must stop somewhere on the way."

"Why should 'e?" inquired the porter hoarsely.

This was rather a poser to Talboyes, but he jerked his head with a knowledgeable air.

"Er—to—to water," he replied. "Find out where it stops and let me know at once."

"'E waters at trarfs," said the porter, returning to the bag.

"Trarfs?"

"Ay, at trarfs."

"Trarfs?" repeated Talboyes, knitting his brows.

"Ay," cried the porter angrily, "At trarfs, at trarfs, at trarfs, trarfs."

"Good God, I must be in Scotland!" commented Talboyes.

The porter slowly completed his task of collecting the papers before again raising his head. When he did so he subjected Talboyes to a prolonged and critical scrutiny.

"Trarfs," he said emphatically.

"Oh, shut up!" said Talboyes. "How am I to get to London to-night?"

"Ye ain't," replied the porter.

"What?"

"Ye ain't a-goin' to—that's what ye ain't a-goin' to do—ye ain't a-goin' to."

"But I must," said Talboyes. He caught sight of an ancient time-table, which was flapping sadly in process of peeling from the wall of the cow-shed. "Let's have a look at this train bill. There must be some connection."

"Noo," said the porter, following as though in defence of the company's property. "We've had oother chaps caught the same way afore now. They've allers 'ad to bide."

"To bide? Where?"

"'Ere," said the porter, indicating the cow-shed.

"What for?"

"Fer the night." The porter nodded cheerfully at the recollection.

Talboyes dismissed the suggestion with a pout of scorn and applied himself to the time-table. He rather fancied himself for his skill in looking up trains. It was the sort of homely, accommodating exercise at which he excelled.

"Now," he said, with a rather more patronizing air to the porter, "when's the first train down?"

"Doown? Ye don't want to goo doown, do ye?"

"Ah, but—now look here. The first train up——"

"Oop?"

"Yes, up—in the morning."

"Oh, oop in the morn. He'd be the 3.15, milk and workmen."

"That settles that," said Talboyes. "I'm not going home with the milk. Now, look here, there's another train down to-night stopping here, I see."

"Ye wants to go oop, don't 'ee?" said the porter.

Talboyes gave him a glance of pitying indulgence.

"Don't you see," he explained, "that if I can get a train *down* I can—wait a moment——"

"Ye'll wait a matter o' two and a 'alf hours," said the porter.

Talboyes ignored this.

"Arrive 10.42," he proceeded below his breath. His busy forefinger left the printed bill to scratch his head. Then he turned in disgust. "What a mis-

erable line," he declared. "There's no connection at all."

"Ay, there ain't," agreed the porter with relish.

"That up-train," said Talboyes, "seems to stop nowhere."

"Ay, Aa told 'ee," replied the porter, "'e waters at trarfs."

"Oh, confound you and your trarfs!" said Talboyes rudely. "What am I to do?"

"Bide," suggested the porter.

"I absolutely refuse to bide. I've got to get home. The point is how am I going to do it."

"Ye ain't a-goin' to—that's what ye ain't a-goin' to do—ye ain't a-go——"

"How many miles is it to London?" interrupted Talboyes quickly.

The porter assumed an air suggestive of a board-school boy under examination.

"They do say it be nigh a 'undred and twenty," he replied.

"Yes, the only thing to do is to get to some junction quickly and catch that up train. Is there anywhere here where I can hire a car?"

"A car?"

"Ay, a car—I mean yes, a car."

"What sart of car might that be?"

"Goodness knows. A very queer sort I should think."

"A 'orse car?"

"No, a motor-car."

"Oo. Them things?"

"Ay, a motor-car—yes, a motor-car."

The porter reflected.

"Ay—" he said.

"Yes?" said Talboyes hopefully.

"Ay. Noo."

Talboyes grew restless; he was subject to a certain disorganization of speech under stress of nervousness or irritation.

"Do you mean ay—I mean no—I mean yes or no?" he asked.

The porter glared at him sternly from beneath his aged, furrowed brows.

"Ay. Noo," he repeated definitely.

"Is there a car?"

"Ay, there ain't."

"There is not a car?"

"Noo."

"Ay—I mean damn!" said Talboyes.

He walked a few paces away and stood looking down at his heavy and unreliable Gladstone bag rather disconsolately. The porter again approached and made overtures.

"Ye might 'ire a pair o' whales," he began in his husky voice.

"Whales?" said the astonished Talboyes.

"Ay, a pair o' whales."

"Oh, you mean wheels?"

"I says what I means," said the disgruntled porter.
"A pair o' whales."

"And what," inquired Talboyes gently, "do you suggest that I should do with a pair of wheels?"

"Why, work 'em."

"Oh, you mean a bicycle?"

"Ay, them things."

"And do you imagine that I am going a hundred and twenty miles at night, carrying a large bag and working wheels?"

"Ay, ye can't do that," agreed the porter on second thoughts, "not with that there harsp."

Talboyes snorted with unusual wrath.

"Disgusting!" he exclaimed. "And I'd have caught the train if you hadn't shut the gate and started playing with your beastly kite."

"She warn't mine," said the porter.

"Then you've no right to try and fly it."

"Aa warn't trying to fly 'er."

"That's ridiculous. What do you keep a kite for if you don't intend to fly it?"

"Aa don't keep 'er."

"You want somebody to keep you," said Talboyes.

He surveyed the rural scenery without enthusiasm. He was not a busy man, but he had a minor engagement in London next morning, and in any case the

prospect of spending a night in this retreat failed to appeal to him in the slightest degree. He was still soaked with perspiration and his temper had not been improved by the porter. He longed for a warm bath and a comfortable dinner at his bachelor club. Fortunately, however, Talboyes was, as has been said, a man of philosophic turn of mind. When he was impetuous it was in the interests of a friend or a client—a lady for preference—and, if he had a quick temper, it was with quick good temper and not with bad that he was animated. So, he concluded, he must make the best of a bad job and seek the hospitality of the local pub.

“I suppose there is an inn?” he said to the porter.

Upon this subject, at all events, the porter could furnish reliable information.

There was an inn conveniently situated upon the road to Mellingham. The sign of the inn was the “Ploo”. To reach it Talboyes must proceed up the hill. How far? The porter, after a moment’s deep calculation, stated that the distance would be about a ’alf-moile, ay, about ’alf a moile it would be, about a ’alf-moile.

“Oh, thank you,” said Talboyes bitterly. “That’s a mile and a half already.”

He gingerly lifted his Gladstone bag and was proceeding to cross the cinder track in the direction

of the yard, when the unexpected and romantic figure of old Noony, the village's oldest inhabitant, appeared in his path. Noony was clad in the rural smock which had served him for many summers, and his whole personality appeared to radiate with an informative benevolence. Talboyes paused.

"Who's this?" he inquired of the porter.

"The oldest man in this 'ere place, 'e be," replied the latter.

"Good," said Talboyes. "He's pretty certain to know more about it then."

"Good even, zur," cried Noony in the high-pitched tones of cheerful second childhood. "What may you be a-wantin' of?"

"I've just missed the last train to London," began Talboyes, "and——"

"Ah, ye shouldn't do that," said Noony.

"Thank you. The point is how am I to get back to London?"

"Ah, that's orkerd, ain't it?" said Noony.

"Ay, that's what Aa tells 'um," added the porter.

"Ay," repeated the oldest inhabitant, nodding gravely. "Ay, that's danged orkerd to be sure. Especially noo ye can't goo be train, ye see."

"I tell you, I've missed it," said Talboyes impatiently.

"Ah, ye shouldn't do that. It makes it orkerd like, don't it?" said Noony.

"Ay," echoed the triumphant porter, "Aa tells 'im 'e'll 'ave to bide."

"Ay, to be sure, ye can do that; ye can bide, ye see," suggested Noony.

"I know I can," replied Talboyes, stifling a malediction, "I'm just going now to—to the 'Ploo.' "

"Ay, the Ploo, the Ploo," shouted Noony enthusiastically, as though all troubles were now at an end.

"Ay, the Ploo," cried the porter.

"Ay, the Ploo, the Ploo," repeated Noony.

"That's what Aa tells 'im—the Ploo," added the porter.

"Just up the hill?" said Talboyes, by way of checking the porter's rather doubtful bearings.

"Ay, a matter of about a 'alf moile," that worthy interrupted.

"Ay, about a 'alf moile, a 'alf moile, to be sure," Noony agreed.

"It's not getting any nearer," said Talboyes. "Have they beds?"

"Bads? Noo, they ain't got no bads."

"What?"

"They ain't 'ad no bads a week come Toosdy, ye see."

"Noo, to be sure," said the porter.

"Well, what have they done with them?"

"With the bads?"

"Ay, the beds—I mean yes, the beds?"

"Why," explained the village ancient with a slow chuckle of secret amusement, "they got all the servants o' them rich folks a-stappin' at the 'all a-stappin' at the Ploo, ye see."

"A-stopping at the hall, a-stopping at the Ploo?" murmured Talboyes, bewildered.

"Ye see," proceeded his counsel, "it's like this 'ere, ye see. Ye see, the rich folk, what's keepin' company oop at the 'all, they can't all bide oop at the 'all, ye see."

"Why not?"

"Why, ye see, there's so many on 'em. What with theirselves and what with their ladies, and what with their men servants and what with their wummen servants——"

"Oh, I see," snapped Talboyes, now aroused to thorough and sarcastic annoyance, "and what with their he-asses and their she-asses, and their he-goats and their she-goats——"

"They ain't got no goats, I 'aven't 'eard tell," said Noony.

"They have, they've got mine; so have you," said Talboyes.

He once more deposited his bag upon the ground and turned to the cow-shed, which he inspected with a sniff of disapproval.

"All right," he said, as though accepting a challenge, "I'll simply sit here and see what happens."

The porter and Noony regarded him and each other with open-mouthed curiosity. But when they saw him take his uncomfortable seat, produce a cigarette from his case, and display no further interest in them, the village cronies presently turned and commenced to indulge in their customary evening intimacies.

"We'll 'ave a tidy drap o' rain, I reckon," said Noony.

"Ay," replied the porter, "and coold."

"Ay, right coold it will be this night."

"Durdy weather it bodes."

"Ay, theck and durdy. Coold too, ye see."

"Ay, and rain."

"Ay, a tidy drap o' rain afore morn."

"I'd rather you did me some tableaux," said Talboyes.

The oldest inhabitant turned with a sigh. He felt disinclined to lay bare his prophetic soul any further in the presence of this Cockney. He frowned at Talboyes severely and again addressed the porter.

"Wull, I must be movin' on, movin' on, ye see."

"Ay," replied the porter. "Wull, Aa must be movin' on meself."

"Ay, then we'd better both be movin' on," said Noony.

"I'm already beginning to like this place better," said Talboyes.

"Wull, goodnight to 'ee, Tarm," said Noony.

"Ay, good night to 'ee, Garge."

"And good night to 'ee, Mister."

"Oh, good night to *you*," said Talboyes.

"Be this your bag, Mister?"

"Leave that bag alone. Don't touch it, do you hear?"

"Ay, be careful o' that, Garge," said the porter.
"It be weak at the harsp."

"Oo, 'e shouldn't be that," said Noony, stooping laboriously and examining the bag.

"Leave it alone at once!" repeated Talboyes.

"Ay, fancy that. Weak at the harsp. Dang me!" said Noony, obeying with some reluctance. "Wull, good night to 'ee."

He hobbled a few paces away, and Talboyes was already breathing a sigh of relief, when the porter was struck by a brilliant inspiration.

"Hi, Garge!" he cried.

Noony halted.

"Be ye a-goin' to the Ploo?" asked the porter.

"Ay, that I be," replied Noony with relish.

"Aa was a-thenkin'," said the porter. "Vowles, oop at the Ploo, 'e 'as a foine pair o' whales."

"Vowles?"

"Ay, Vowles—Ben Vowles."

"Oo, ay. Ben Vowles. Whales?"

"Ay, whales, whales, a pair o' whales."

"Oo, ay. A pair o' whales. Ay."

"Look here," shouted Talboyes. "I don't want any whales, and I don't want you, and for pity's sake tell Ben Vowles to—to bide at the Ploo."

"Ay, 'e don't want 'em," said the porter, with a little grunt which conveyed his estimation of Talboyes for not wanting them.

"'E don't want 'em?" said Noony incredulously. "Wull, dang 'im, and dang me, and good night to 'ee, Tarm."

"Ay, good night to 'ee, Garge."

"And good night to 'ee, Mister."

"Oh, good night, good night, good night," sighed Talboyes.

For some moments after the welcome departure of Noony, the porter stood regarding Talboyes with intense interest, as though he were a specimen of humanity hitherto unrecorded at Mellingham. Finally, yielding to the severe frown with which this curiosity was greeted, he nodded three times very slowly and said "Ay." After which he shuffled away to his sanctum in the yard.

To a tired and hungry man of middle-age and respectable habits the accommodation offered by the cow-shed was little short of barbarous. Talboyes tested several positions on the seat, which was exceedingly hard and narrow. Moreover, he was un-

able to assume any confidence in its cleanliness. He tested it in this respect with his pocket-handkerchief and found it wanting. He presently sat up and asked himself why he was being such an ass as to worry about the cow-shed at all, for to spend the night there, especially without food, was out of the question. On the other hand, the prospect of wandering vaguely into the village in search of a dinner and bed was almost equally trying. He realized, however, that he must take steps in the matter. The time was now eight o'clock. Mellingham was obviously populated by half-baked rustics, rigidly observant, no doubt, of a conventional Curfew. Perhaps he would be well-advised to explore before Noony and his associates left the *Plough*.

Suddenly Talboyes sat upright in an attitude of attention. From the station yard came the sound of a car—the swish of studded tyres grating on the cinders as they spun round in a quick, final turn and were brought to rest. Next moment a young chauffeur, wearing a smart uniform, came hurrying round the corner into view of Talboyes, whom he greeted with an exclamation of surprise and pleasure.

“Ah, here you are, sir,” he cried. “Sorry I’m late, sir.”

“Hello,” said Talboyes doubtfully but not without encouragement.

“Very sorry, sir. If I’d thought it was really

likely you were here, I'd have come and fetched you earlier."

"Oh, not at all," said Talboyes. "As a matter of fact I—I didn't—I didn't expect you at all. That is——"

"I had a bit o' trouble with my engine," said the chauffeur.

"Really? Yes, so had I—in a way."

"All our cars are being used very hard just now," explained the chauffeur with a confidential smile.

Talboyes opened his eyes widely.

"All of them?" he said. "But er—how many cars have you got?"

"Six in all," replied the chauffeur with non-chalance.

"Six cars!" cried Talboyes. There appeared to be no half-measures about this gift of the gods.

"As long as I can get hold of one——"

"That's all right, sir," said the chauffeur. "This one's running a treat again now."

"I wish I might be allowed to hire a car to——"

"Hire?" interrupted the chauffeur effusively. "His lordship would never dream of letting you pay."

"No, er—no, I see," said Talboyes. "But the truth of the matter is I want to try and get back to London to-night, and——"

"Oh I see, sir," answered the chauffeur. "I under-

stood that you expected to stop down here for the night."

"Yes, well, I—I did," replied Talboyes. "But of course if you think his lordship would really lend me a car—You see the trouble really is that his lordship doesn't expect me."

"Oh yes, sir," cried the chauffeur reassuringly. "His lordship felt pretty sure that I should bring you back with me. That's why I came down here to the station. His lordship heard that you had had a bit of bad luck."

The plausibility of this statement quite startled Talboyes. He saw visions of a noble and neighbouring philanthropist with a remarkable intelligence system and a large stud of cars for the benefit of stranded wayfarers.

"A bit of bad luck—yes?" he murmured.

"Yes, sir," went on the chauffeur. "Missed your train, didn't you?"

"Oh yes," agreed Talboyes readily. "Yes, I certainly missed my train."

"Yes, that's what his lordship heard, or something of the sort any'ow," said the chauffeur in a matter of fact tone, sucking his teeth. "So, you see, he sent me out scouting about for you."

"Really, this is extraordinarily thoughtful of his lordship," cried Talboyes, arguing within himself against the obvious theory of mistaken identity.

The chauffeur appeared to think that the credit was due entirely to himself. He jerked his head in acknowledgment of 'Talboyes' enthusiasm and said:

"Oh, not at all. Why I'd have been here sooner if I'd known you were waiting here."

Reason returned at that moment to Talboyes. "Of course it's all a mistake," he thought, "and he thinks I'm somebody else—some guest who has gone adrift." But the possibility of allowing the chance of rescue from the horrors of the cow-shed to slip through his fingers, especially rescue which embraced the free use of a swift and luxurious car, was too cruel to be contemplated. Talboyes could scarcely believe that a righteous man could be subjected to so tantalizing a freak of fortune. Still vaguely hopeful he hedged.

"I don't quite understand why his lordship should know I was here, all the same," he began.

"He didn't know," replied the chauffeur immediately, with a suggestion of impatience in his manner. "He just guessed."

"But does he often guess like that? I really believe, mind you, that I—that he——"

"I think he telephoned to your house and so he knew you had started," said the chauffeur.

Ah, dash it, then it was all a mistake. Talboyes shook his head with a sad smile of resignation.

"No," he said. "I'm very sorry to disappoint his lordship, but——"

"But you won't," argued the chauffeur, with now undisguised impatience. "You'll still be in plenty of time. If you'll just hop in the car, we'll have you in the Hall in half a jiffy."

"Oh, the Hall? Is that where his lordship——?"

"Yes, sir. His lordship said you might not know exactly where the place was you were going to."

"M'yes, he's quite right," said Talboyes in an undertone.

"That's why I thought I might find you here," explained the chauffeur explicitly, as though dealing with a thick-headed schoolboy. "His lordship says to me, 'As none of us know the gentleman, and he's a total stranger and has lost his train, you just keep on making inquiries in likely places in case he turns up.'"

"Ah, but who?"

"Why, *you*."

"Ah, but who—who am I?"

"I don't exactly recollect the name, sir; but you *are* the gentleman that missed his train, aren't you?"

There was no denying this.

"Yes, oh yes," Talboyes said. "I'm the gentleman who missed his train."

"That's right then," said the chauffeur, taking an encouraging step towards the yard.

"But I'm afraid there's some mistake," argued Talboyes, preparing, despite himself, to follow. "I want to go back to town. I don't really want to go to the Hall—at least I suppose I shall have to go to the Hall first, but——"

"Well, naturally," said the chauffeur, noting the other's hesitancy with a rather derisive smile.

"Oh yes, naturally, naturally," proceeded Talboyes hastily. "But do you think his lordship will help me to get back to town to-night?"

"Yes, I suppose so, if it's urgent," said the chauffeur with a sigh.

"It's very urgent. I wouldn't dream of troubling his lordship if it wasn't urgent," said Talboyes sternly.

"But of course, as I say, his lordship has got a bedroom for you if you care to use it."

Talboyes thought of the reported congestion at the Hall and indulged in a brief but gloomy premonition of his lordship's probable reception of a confessed imposter.

"Anyhow," he said, "his lordship seems a very kind-hearted man, and perhaps he—he won't mind——"

"Oh, he is that, sir," said the chauffeur. "Popular with high and low."

"At the same time I really—He's the sort of man to do another a good turn?"

The chauffeur's restraint was overcome. He gave vent to that sharp sound of the tongue between the teeth which is understood universally to imply irritation.

"Oh, he'll send you back to town all right if only you'll come and do *your* turn," he snapped.

Talboyes' face assumed an expression of bewilderment at this. The chauffeur, rather ashamed of having given vent to his feelings, mistook the bewilderment for righteous indignation and relapsed into apologetic submission.

"What do you mean?" said Talboyes.

"No offence, sir," said the chauffeur.

"But I want to know what you mean."

"My mistake, sir. I didn't mean to put it like that."

"Look here," cried Talboyes in desperation. "I'm afraid I must be frank with you."

"I beg pardon, sir. No liberty intended."

"No, but don't you see, you've made a great mistake?"

"I do now, sir. I spoke without thinking what I was saying."

"Yes, but I'm not the man you take me for."

"I see that now, sir. I'm very sorry if I offended."

"You don't understand."

"Yes, now I do, sir."

"You do not," cried Talboyes hotly. "I'm not going to the Hall."

"Oh don't say that, sir," pleaded the chauffeur, becoming abject in apology. "His lordship would be terribly upset to think you've taken such offence."

"I haven't taken offence, I——"

The chauffeur brightened.

"Then please do jump into the car, sir," he urged.

Talboyes wavered. There appeared to be no alternative to taking advantage of this spirited idiot. He simply refused to listen to denial. He was already stooping to lift the Gladstone bag.

"Leave that alone," said Talboyes sharply. "It's weak at the harsp."

"Pardon, sir?"

"The harsp, harsp. Never mind, leave it alone. No, give it to me. By gad, I'll go and see his lordship! It's the very best thing I can do."

"I hope, sir," said the chauffeur softly, "that you won't let anything I've said——"

Talboyes had made up his mind. There was no stopping him now.

"Hand me that bag," he repeated. "Mind the harsp. Quick, come along now. Take me to his lordship. Hurry up."

He hurried towards the yard, where the massive car stood in readiness for the adventure. The chauffeur followed, agreeably surprised at the sudden show of decision.

"What about this kite, sir?" he called. "Is that yours too?"

"No," roared Talboyes.

CHAPTER II

“**N**OW here we have the inner, or Armorial Hall.”

The speaker concluded his announcement with a smack of the lips and a long intake of the breath which implied that any further tribute to the beauties of his Armorial hall would be superfluous. He was a man of fine build, debased of recent years by self-complacency and good-living into mere obesity. When, as now, his large, clean-shaven face enjoyed a premeditated smile, not only his mouth smiled but ripple on ripple of multiplied chin beneath extended in reflecting semi-circles of gratification to his very tie-pin.

This was Lord Mellingham; and it must be conceded that he had justification for self-esteem. He was the first Baron Mellingham, founder of a dynasty; and this, Mellingham Hall, swept, garnished, redecorated and embellished, his county seat. That his lordship was of humble origin was perhaps slightly perceptible, but this merely emphasized the strength of personality and mastery of public affairs

which had won for him the wealth and position in which he openly gloried. That the embellishment of the Hall had resulted in a monumental exhibition of expensive vulgarity was but another proof of the inevitably democratic tendency in the foundation of modern dynasties.

The present tour of inspection had been organized for the benefit of two ladies. Wattle, his lordship's head butler, completed the party, remaining at a discreet distance and treating his master's panegyrics to sub-conscious but enthusiastic imitation with strange facial contortions.

Of the two ladies one was a dark, willowy maiden in the early twenties. She wore a travelling costume of cheap green. She followed the remarks of her host with an emotional silence. A generation back she would undoubtedly have trailed in the wake of Bunthorne; to-day she was reduced to the study of social reform in many of the unconventional aspects embraced by that prolific parent of anomalies. The soulful maiden was Miss Helen Monk, niece of Lord Mellingham; her companion nominally a chaperon. But one glance at the smart, engaging widow, of thirty, to whom his lordship's observations were exclusively addressed, sufficed to relegate the niece into a harmless, necessary excuse. Wattle had grasped the situation from the very moment when his master had floundered forth to welcome his visitors and had

escorted the widow in triumph over the mobile tiger-skin on the slippery parquet floor of the Vestibule into the inner, or Armorial Hall.

Mrs. Tavistock mastered her countenance and reviewed the Armorial Hall with a keen smile of deference. From its walls depended the derelict portraits of a few unreclaimed knights and ladies, surmounted by incompatible coats of arms and by an occasional battle-axe or humiliated blunderbuss mellowed with the stains of long usage in the piratical quarter of Tottenham Court Road. In relief to the air of antiquity furnished by these relics, the furniture of the hall—the long hall table and the several chairs, easy and uneasy—was of choice George V. pattern. An assortment of highly decorative mats, augmented by the skins of strange beasts, covered various portions of the floor. Bronze statues of ladies with abnormal figures held aloft cut-glass globes pregnant with illumination of sufficient candle-power to equip a series of small lighthouses. The staircase was situated at one end of the Armorial Hall, near the doorway to the Vestibule, the stairs covered with a plain carpet of a restful shade of bright green.

“And,” said his lordship, swinging open tall folding doors, “the drawing-room.”

The “and” was distinctive, like that “and” which distinguishes the star performer in a theatrical hand-

bill. It was meant to be. Lord Mellingham looked upon this drawing-room as the final and consummate expression of his decorative genius. Spacious and lofty, magnificent with gilt mirrors and the massive frames of expensive water-colours—yes, Mrs. Tavistock might well exclaim “Oh” like that.

“Step across to the conservatory, my dear lady,” said his lordship. “One gains an even better impression of the room from that aspect.” He led the way, rolling. “There,” he cried. “View the room from here. Be careful not to step backwards; there is a small artificial pond at your back. Yes, I have given considerable thought to this room. The ceiling decoration was specially designed. If you move a little to your left—Wattle, kindly come and remove this stuffed heron.”

He moved forward into the room and stood with his back to the marble fireplace, his feet firmly planted upon the skin of the largest and most versicolored bear known to taxidermy. From the great gilt clock on the mantelpiece behind him Cupids sprouted, their arms outstretched, as though invoking the blessings of Eros upon his brow. On either hand were massive chandeliers, ornamented with layers of heavy crystal icicles. Lord Mellingham took a short but blissful survey of this capacious inner shrine of Peace with Money; then he returned to Mrs. Tavistock’s side with an inquiring smile.

"It must mean an awful lot of work," observed that lady.

"I have taken great pains with this room I admit."

"But I mean now—the upkeep. All your chintzes and lace curtains are so beautifully spotless. And the chairs—I should think gilt-backed chairs want a lot of dusting; and the Chesterfield—what a huge one!"

"It is, I believe, the most commodious settee of that type which can be obtained," observed Lord Mellingham.

"And all these gilt frames, and the grand piano!"

It was, incidentally, the grandest piano in Dorsetshire.

"Yes, yes," said Lord Mellingham, "the upkeep of such a room as this is a considerable item. But you must remember, my dear lady, that in these days it is fortunately possible to employ labour-saving devices of great scope and ingenuity."

And, indeed, the whole house contained an adequate supply of all those paraphernalia whereby the domestic scientist contrives that owner and guest may light themselves, cool themselves, feed themselves, clean themselves and burn themselves by original and expeditious means.

Helen Monk murmured a sort of sophistical amen to her uncle's tribute to progression, but he passed it unheeded.

"This room," he continued, addressing Mrs. Tavistock, "will undergo a very marked transition to-morrow. This is to be our ball-room."

"Oh, the dance is to-morrow night?"

"Yes, all is in readiness. You are the last of my house-party to put in an appearance, Mrs. Tavistock; but, of course, the majority of the ball guests reside in the neighbourhood."

They were retracing their steps to the hall over the great expanse of Turkey carpet. Mrs. Tavistock stole a glance at Helen, who had paused to bestow an earnest gaze upon one of the most expensive of the water-colours.

"I hope all the best people are coming," she said. "Remember, you promised me you would ask them."

A bland smile and its reflections illuminated his lordship's face.

"Several of the oldest and best county families will be represented," he replied. "I hardly suppose it is an invitation which anyone will willingly ignore."

"Splendid!" said Mrs. Tavistock. "I want Helen to be introduced to all the nice, fat, wealthy, young county bucks. She has never had much of a chance, you know, poor Helen."

"Helen is not my guest of honour," ventured the peer in an undertone, peering, with an exultant smile, into her face.

Mrs. Tavistock made no reply but waited in the

drawing-room doorway for Helen to rejoin them. There was a tinge of colour in the widow's cheek, but there was no apparent change in the ease of her manner as she made some trivial remark concerning the splendours of the drawing-room to Helen.

"And now," said Lord Mellingham, relapsing unwillingly into his rôle of showman, "would you care to make the acquaintance of your fellow-guests, or would you prefer first to be shown to your room?"

"Thank you, Lord Mellingham, I think I should really prefer to be shown to my room."

"By all means. Wattle, the ladies will be shown to their rooms. There is still half an hour to tea-time; but pray, Mrs. Tavistock, do not wait for tea-time if you require any refreshment after your journey. If you are in need of anything at any time you have but to say the word, ring the bell or use the telephone."

"The telephone?"

"Yes, the telephone is laid on in every room," said Lord Mellingham expansively. "I find it convenient."

"Really? What for—— Yes, I see, how very nice," said Mrs. Tavistock with unwonted indecision.

Shown to her room, she sat upright on the bed—though a padded arm-chair about the size of a modest tomb stood close at hand—and viewed the pleth-

ora of modern conveniences, the telephone, the electric fan, the burglar and fire alarms, with a long-drawn sigh of perplexity. A small portmanteau and a dressing-case had been duly deposited in a corner of the room, and she scanned them as though hesitating whether they should be unpacked. Her dejection did not last long. She was experienced at making the best of a bad job. The long mirror across the room reflected a whimsical smile and a momentary exaggeration of the dainty tilt of her nose. She repeated the little grimace at the mirror for her own satisfaction. Her lurking suspicions of Lord Mellingham's attitude towards her had received direct confirmation within ten minutes of her arrival. Her philanthropic motive in championing the hopeless Helen had decoyed her. She mentally revisited the conservatory and took stock of that drawing-room with a shudder; next, the Armorial Hall, the Vestibule with its marble pillars. It had suddenly become quite obvious that his lordship contemplated gathering all these wonders into his broad arms, like some ponderous Djinn, and laying them at her feet. But for that fact Mrs. Tavistock would have been fully prepared to enjoy herself.

As it was, she apparently decided that she would not be worsted by any deplorable developments. She rose with a sudden energy from the bed and, crossing the room, unlocked her boxes. After which she

sought the inferior room to which Helen had been shown.

The latter was superintending the unpacking of her wardrobe with the pleasurable fussiness of one to whom a handmaid is a novelty.

"Are you my maid too?" asked Mrs. Tavistock.

"No, madam," replied the domestic. "Minnie is."

"Oh, Minnie. Well, I just wanted a word with Miss Monk, if you—"

"Oh, yes, 'm." The maid tacitly withdrew.

"Helen," said Mrs. Tavistock, "I want you to tell me something."

"Oh, Stella, what, dear?"

"You know that night when Lord Mellingham was on his visit to you at Croydon and I came in to see you?"

"Yes, dear."

"How soon after that did he propose that you should come down here?"

"Almost the next day, if not quite."

"Quite, I expect. And when your mother wrote to me and said she couldn't go with you, but that there was an idea that I should be asked instead of her?"

"Yes?"

"Helen, was your mother even invited at all?"

"Oh, dear," said Helen in the manner of a sorely-tried female Washington. "No, dear."

"So Lord Mellingham really asked you on condition that I could come with you—was that it?"

"Nearly it."

"Very nearly, I should think," said Mrs. Tavistock.

"Oh, dear," said Helen. "How did you guess? Did Uncle Percival tell you?"

"Yes, he told me just now," replied Mrs. Tavistock reflectively, "but only indirectly. I'd never seen him since that evening. He wrote and said he was glad that I would come and that he intended giving a dance; and of course I wrote back and said 'not at all' and that I was sure you would enjoy it very much; but—"

"Oh, Stella," appealed Helen, folding some linen mystery with the aid of both hands and a chin, "you mustn't be—I'm sure mother didn't mean to be deceitful, except in a good cause."

Mrs. Tavistock forcibly removed the mystery from Helen's embrace and, folding it with a deft movement, laid it on the bed.

"I will overlook the deception, Helen," she said, "if you'll promise me faithfully to have a good time."

"Oh, I—I'm a little nervous you know, Stella, but I think I shall. Isn't it a beautiful house?"

"Well," said Mrs. Tavistock in a practical tone, "pull your socks up and you may get one like it."

"Oh, Stella!"

"Don't take off your hat yet. When you're ready come along to my room and we'll brave tea-time together, shall we? That's right." In the doorway she paused. "Don't forget you're in a very strong position here," she added. "You're Lord Mellingham's niece and the dance is being given for you; so you needn't care two hoots for anybody you don't like, but treat them with great affability and charm."

She returned to her own room. There was much in her mind concerning their noble host which she did not reveal to Helen. She did not reveal her shrewd suspicion that his recent recognition of a poor and unacknowledged branch of his family had been forced upon him when stranded in London during a busy season when hotels and clubs were congested to overflowing. It would not be Mrs. Tavistock's fault if his new-born interest in that obscure household failed to assume a more permanent form than a week's gratuitous patronage. Mrs. Monk was her friend. In the days when a very young widow had been left, wide-eyed, to earn her living, Helen's kindly, foolish mother had proved a friend in need. When, on a recent evening visit, Mrs. Tavistock had discovered a fat peer occupying the only fairly comfortable chair in the little sitting-room, the elder

widow had confided to her in an aside the enigmatical hope that Percival might mean to "do something" for Helen. And here, sure enough, was Helen, invited to the Hall. But with what a motive! Small wonder that Lord Mellingham had won a reputation as a successful man of business.

A homely and wistful country maid interrupted Mrs. Tavistock's ruminations. She advanced shyly and greeted the visitor with a salutation which was a studied foreshortening of a curtsy.

"If I had but known that you were here, madam, I would have come before," she said.

"It's quite all right," said Mrs. Tavistock kindly. "But there are one or two things you can help me with. In the first place, just show me which of all these switches on the wall operates which thing."

The maid sighed.

"I 'ardly know, to tell the truth about it, madam," she confessed nervously. "The last time I went for to set the fan going, I went and warmed up that flat-iron thing."

"Quite possibly," said Mrs. Tavistock with sympathetic gravity. "They all ought to be labelled, oughtn't they?"

"In the bathroom they are," said the maid.

The private bathroom adjoined the sleeping apartment. The maid held open the door as she spoke, and Mrs. Tavistock investigated with eager curiosity.

Here, as the maid had stated, the various appliances attached to the bath were stamped respectively with small metal tallies: "wave," "splash," "plunge," "shower," "surf," "gurge," "swash" and "tornado." The maid watched the face of the visitor furtively as the latter examined these bathing facilities in turn.

"But, how, madam, you get the water into the bath in the ordinary Christian manner, I have not as yet found out," she confessed.

"Never mind," replied Mrs. Tavistock. "When I have my bath I'll try swashing for a start. What's that little thing? Perhaps that operates the ordinary water."

"Don't touch it, madam," cried the maid warningly. "That thing goes and heats up the bath-mat enough to burn the soles off the shoes of your feet."

"You don't seem to find these modern conveniences save you a great deal of labour," remarked Mrs. Tavistock, as she returned to the bedroom.

"I do not," said the maid. "I'm not used to such, and they only get giving extra trouble. In me last place, should a member of the family think to have a bath the water would be hotted in the kitchen and carried up in a can as is the natural fashion. In this house there is not one single, honest bath-can to be found. Only crazinesses like of this sort."

"But still it is not a very good principle to make complaints to visitors. What is your name and where was your last place?"

"Me name is Minnie and me last place was at Squire Pilling's at Wycombe Parva, and if I did make complaint it was only because, madam, if you please, you smiled so kindly like as if you could understand."

"But you must be careful not to let people's appearances lead you to speak so openly. I quite understand your not finding this home like your last place. I expect it is very much larger for one thing, isn't it?"

Minnie shook her head vigorously.

"It is not near so big," she said. "Why, the house at Wycombe Parva is bigger by a whole story full o' rooms. And the grounds are not so big either. The Squire's land runs further than any estate in the neighbourhood."

"Oh, in the neighbourhood? Something Parva is near here, then?"

"It can't be very near," explained Minnie, "owing to the stretch o' Squire Pilling's land; but the estate runs to within a mile o' this place."

"Really," said Mrs. Tavistock, with some interest. "Here is my key, Minnie. Unpack my dressing-case for me, will you please? And what does the family consist of? Are there any sons?"

"There is two, Mister Samuel and Mister Oliver," replied Minnie with enthusiasm.

"And do they often come here?"

Minnie looked up from the dressing-case with a vacant expression on her fresh, red face.

"Where?" she asked.

"Here. To this house. They are neighbours, you say?"

"They would never come *here*," said Minnie in a voice almost of horror.

"Why not?"

Minnie blushed and remained silent for a moment.

"If I was to tell you the true reason, madam," she said, "maybe you would think I ought not to speak so, especially after what you found necessary to say to me just now."

"I see. I suppose there has been some little misunderstanding between his lordship and Squire What-you-may-callit. Is that it?"

"The Squire and his lady are County," Minnie whispered as though making her confession.

"Oh. But do not all the County people visit here?"

Minnie sought her interlocutor's face and decided that she had nothing to fear.

"Not one of them," she replied. "Not what I call the real County folks. A lot of the people from Coombe Puddly and the towns, who are very

nice ladies and gentlemen to be sure, they come, madam. But the old County families—the real old County that is, like the Squire and Mrs. Pilling and the Misses Homer of Deepdale and Miss Starchfield and Sir Richard and Lady Garner—they holds aloft.”

“Indeed? Miss Starchfield? H’m. Have you got all the things out of that dressing-case, Minnie?”

“Yes, madam, all.”

“Oh no, I think there is still something in there, isn’t there?”

Minnie inclined the dressing-case laterally and displayed its emptiness.

“Dear, dear,” said Mrs. Tavistock with a tiny frown of vexation. “I must have left it at home.”

“Oh, madam. Nothing important?”

“No, no; nothing very important. Only a photograph.”

Her mind dwelt affectionately upon that photograph in its solitary state, marooned upon the otherwise dismantled dressing-table in her quiet flat in town—a time-worn leather frame encircling the likeness of a stout, middle-aged man with kind eyes and a smile of pensive contentment like waning sunshine—the likeness of Henry Talboyes.

CHAPTER III

THE company to which Mrs. Tavistock was introduced at tea-time reminded that discriminating lady of an hotel on the Brighton Road at lunch-time on a Sunday in summer. The large majority of the guests assembled were male and the small majority Gentile. Three ladies and seven gentlemen formed the party prior to the arrival of Mrs. Tavistock and Helen.

She maintained her customary self-possession under the ordeal of introduction to these persons. The men regarded her subtly with narrow eyes, as though to inform her that they were already parties to her secret. The ladies protruded their nostrils in a manner which suggested that they relied upon their sense of smell to gauge her merits. One only of the party appeared to contrast favorably with the others. This was Peter Dollery, nephew and heir presumptive to Lord Mellingham; a presentable, ordinary youth, unspoilt as yet by his uncle's efforts to instruct him in the paths of nobility. Mrs. Tavistock greeted him pleasantly, with tidings of his almost unheard-of

Croydon relatives, and relegated him hopefully to Helen.

Tea, though elaborate, was served in an expeditious manner. Urns and dishes were placed upon a specially devised stand which was set on wheels with small pneumatic tyres. This article of furniture was propelled without loss of dignity by one of the two footmen, William and Francis, or, on occasions when the number of guests demanded a particularly heavy load of tea, by both.

When Mrs. Tavistock and Helen made their appearance they found that the other members of the party had already fallen on this tea-stand with considerable relish. Four of them had completed the meal, and the introductions interrupted a rubber of Bridge. The remainder were grouped round Lord Mellingham, eagerly discussing the prospects of the dance and criticizing the arrangements.

"Ah," cried his lordship rapturously, stretching out his arms towards Mrs. Tavistock, "here is our arbiter. My dear lady, I am being subjected to a great deal of criticism. In my praiseworthy efforts to entertain you, I have, it appears, committed a grievous mistake."

"I don't think so at all," put in one of the male guests, who was standing beside his host. This was a short gentleman of a dark and rather mottled countenance. He seemed very much at his ease in

the company of his distinguished host, for he only removed his thumbs from the arm-holes of his waistcoat in order to seize a small cucumber sandwich which he devoured in one mouthful. "I don't think so at all," repeated this gentleman. "Don't know the Dipper duo meself, but these country folks of yours don't know the difference, so what does it matter?"

"Pray, Mrs. Tavistock, allow me to offer you some tea," said Lord Mellingham. "And, when you have partaken, I beg you to come to my aid."

"What is troubling you?" asked Mrs. Tavistock.

"Well, in my anxiety to make to-morrow's entertainment as—what shall I say?—fashionable as possible—for you know, Mrs. Tavistock that even in these secluded parts of the country, people delight in trying to follow the fashions of the town—I be-thought myself of engaging a couple of those professional dancers who appear, so I am told, at the dancing clubs and some of the restaurants of London. My idea was that they should perform at intervals during the evening, and should provide my guests with an object lesson in the intricacies of the dance which my nephew informs me is known as 'jazz.'"

"Well, what happened?"

"I made inquiries of an agency, with a view to obtaining the most celebrated of these professional

couples. Naturally, I mean to say, one wishes to guarantee that in such an instance the agents shall not take advantage of their client being in the country to——”

“Unload their duds on yer,” put in the small, dark visitor, eating.

Lord Mellingham produced some correspondence from his breast pocket and reviewed it critically.

“I have received several letters from the agents,” he proceeded. “They were unable to secure any of the most celebrated dancers for an engagement so far from London, despite the fact that I offered to find them sleeping accommodation in the Hall.”

“In the hall?” said Mrs. Tavistock “I should hardly consider that an enticement.”

“In Mellingham Hall. In the house, my dear lady,” explained the peer with forbearance.

“Oh, I see,” said Mrs. Tavistock, a little depressed to observe that the company regarded her with silent surprise.

“However,” said Lord Mellingham, “they eventually made an engagement on my behalf. They are sending down some persons whom they describe as—yes, b’rh’hm,” he turned to his correspondence—“as ‘specialists who have achieved considerable reputation in America, and who have proved highly successful in their engagements hitherto in this country. We have no hesitation in recommending your

lordship to extend your patronage to these artistes, who we are confident will fully justify the same.' The artistes in question are known as Hank and Pauline Dipper."

"Not to me," said a stout lady from the Bridge table. "I've never heard of them, and I don't mind betten' nobody else has either. Two diamonds."

"I agree with you, Mrs. Appleby," said another of the players. "We shall find that they might just as well be a couple of amateurs. I've seen one or two of these dancing duo acts, and as a rule they don't come out with anything one can't do oneself."

"I rather think," said Lord Mellingham in a sinister manner, "that they will not impose upon me. If I find that they are second-rate, I shall take steps to put matters right."

"What will you do? Give another dance and get some better people?" asked Mrs. Tavistock innocently.

But his lordship refrained from divulging the secrets of his hypothetical plans for revenge.

"Of course the chief difficulty will be to decide whether they have been dancing well or badly," continued Mrs. Tavistock. "I have sometimes seen English girls dancing quite as well in my opinion as some of the Russian *prima ballerine*, even those with the longest names. It's a case for individual taste, isn't it?"

"Now, Mrs. Tavistock," said Mr. Harris, the short dark gentleman of the cucumber sandwiches.

"Yes, now just as much as before the war——"

"I didn't say 'naow,' I said 'now'—meaning not sow! I can't agree. I could tell you a decent act from a dud in half a tick."

"Uncle," chimed in the voice of Peter from a corner of the room, "Helen says she knows something of this fellow Dipper."

This announcement caused general and critical interest. Helen, blushing shyly, was called upon. Mrs. Tavistock seized the opportunity to remark:

"Oh, well, Helen goes everywhere. She's likely to be the best authority."

It appeared that Helen had never actually encountered Mr. Hank Dipper, but that gentleman's name was familiar to her by reason of his having been responsible for certain magazine articles upon hygienic culture in the home, which had made a special appeal to her progressive views. The lady at the card table stated that in her opinion the fact that Mr. Dipper was driven to push his name before the public by such means argued a struggle to obtain recognition and engagements. Mrs. Appleby was, however, handicapped in the delivery of this criticism by the retention of a cigarette-holder of unusual size between her lips; and Mrs. Tavistock scored with a final pronouncement that, in her

opinion, the very names Hank and Pauline Dipper were resonant with the spirit of jazz.

Lord Mellingham was delighted with her ready sociability. What a hostess! He stood over her and practically pushed the remainder of her tea at her, after which he invited her to accompany him for a stroll in the grounds. Mrs. Tavistock accepted gracefully, but showed curious lack of perception in bidding Helen accompany them. His lordship discounted this by bidding Peter accompany Helen, but his efforts in the course of the stroll to shake off the younger couple were frustrated. And it was poor Mrs. Tavistock who was unconsciously responsible for this adversity. True, she responded with gay animation to her host as, walking in advance with her, he sought her opinion on this or that feature of his grounds or terrace. The combination sun-dial and weather prophet, for instance, proved to have so great a fascination for her that she must needs pause and subject it to prolonged examination, shouting to Helen to come and behold the marvellous object.

"What a tiny little summer-house," she cried. "Why, there's only room for about two people in it."

"I understand that to be a feature of the pattern," replied his lordship dryly. "In the catalogue it is designated 'The Cuddly House,' which I presume is the designer's method of suggesting that his outhouse

has been constructed mainly for purposes of *tête-à-tête*. Shall we enter?"

"I think I see a spider there," said Mrs. Tavistock, peering tentatively within.

"A spider? Oh, surely no?"

"Yes, a big one. Don't kill it, Lord Mellingham."

"Kill it, my dear lady—I fail even to see it. But a spider in my new summer-house! I will inform my head-gardener of this."

As a last resort his lordship presently turned to Peter and ordered him to take Helen and show her the lake. His manner seemed to convey a hint that Peter should throw Helen into it. He stole a satisfied glance at the dainty features of the widow and found them radiant with a new enthusiasm.

"A lake," cried Mrs. Tavistock. "I love a lake. Do take me to see it too. Do you punt much?"

"I think we might leave such exercises to these youngsters," replied Lord Mellingham nervously.

"Oh, I'm not too old to punt," said Mrs. Tavistock briskly. "And, in any case, Lord Mellingham, if you had had the misfortune to live near the river, as I have, you would realize that it is a recognized thing to be quite elderly in a punt."

"But, alas, I do not keep a punt on this lake," said Lord Mellingham, hastening to keep pace with the others who were now moving rapidly in the direc-

tion of the artificial pool, one of the many scenic attractions of the estate.

"No punt? You are not a keen punter perhaps? Never mind."

"My dear lady," pleaded the stout and fervant peer, breathless in his efforts to remain at her side, "to-morrow I will send to the—most reliable firm—in the country for their—punt catalogue——"

"Oh, why should you? You don't care about it."

"I never considered the—matter until now. I—must do so. I—should enjoy it, I am confident. I feel it would—be delightful to be able to punt you about."

So far but no further did the worthy host succeed that evening. No matter; the opportunity was bound to offer itself shortly. Better that the first, doubtless rather bewildering impressions of Mellingham Hall should be allowed to sink. "Sink," he repeated the thought to himself, as he performed his elaborate toilet for dinner. He scrutinized his countenance in the mirror, speculating on the effect which such a face would have upon himself, were he to meet himself. It was a face at which, Lord Mellingham thought, most women would look twice. Here he was right. There was a suggestion of comfort, he told himself in the chin; of sensitive geniality in the nose. He found in his eyes a gleam of almost reprehensible insinuation. And crowning all, was that

dome of intellect, from which the sparse grey hairs, carefully tended and glistening with pomatum, lay obediently back on either side of the broad natural parting. Yes, it was a remarkable face. A woman of Mrs. Tavistock's discrimination might have hesitated to accept an ugly man, whatever might be his rank and possessions. But this was, thank God, a remarkable face—full of character. Lord Mellingham patted it. "Yes, sink, sink," he repeated thoughtfully.

The idea of failure did not occur to him from the outset. Ever since the day, now some months past, when he had established himself permanently in the garnished magnificence of the Hall, it had been obvious that the neighbourhood expected, nay intended, him to marry. Striving matrons had lugged their eligibles from premeditated seclusion and borne them down to the Hall with hoarse whispers of final admonition almost audible above the crunching wheels of the limousines, as they drew up in the gravel drive. These attentions delighted his lordship, who received them with the dispassionate urbanity of a caliph inspecting candidates for his exclusive harem.

But no heart—even his—could be penetrated by a slow and systematic method of boring. In one inspired moment the merry, almost challenging eyes of Mrs. Tavistock had pierced the objective which had blunted the time-worn shafts of Coombe Puddy.

And it certainly never crossed his mind that the objective could be anything but a prize of the rarest value in the ambitions of woman.

His lordship had been married before—hence the rather inappropriate affinity with Mrs. Monk—but the history of that brief episode had been shelved in an early volume of his life's romance; before the days of his business triumphs and of his association with the House of Commons, the most notable clubs and *Who's Who*. One had but to glance at the synopsis of his success in the latter to note the rapidity of his rise to greatness. His peerage dated from the Armistice, being the reward of prolific activity in unidentified Government departments. He had been Percival Dollery, M.P., since 1900, and formerly chairman of a well-known firm of Government contractors—his retirement on joining the Government had been unnecessarily ostensible. His clubs could be ascertained—lugubrious institutions of hackneyed eminence—his favourite recreation, gardening. And true it was that Lord Mellingham took great pride and pleasure in his grounds and in the army of labourers whom he employed to preserve the symmetrical elegance of lawns and shrubberies; but there can be little doubt that the recreation which he candidly favoured above all others was to stand before his drawing-room fireplace, against the background of sprouting Cupids, with the icicles of the

chandeliers tinkling faintly above his head; and to receive the optimistic flattery of such eminent rustics as Sir Enoch and Lady Pharo of Deepcombe Magna, with their rather green daughter, Gloria; Mrs. Duckingham-Leape of Coombe Puddy, and even Mrs. and the Misses Bodie, all the way from Maiden Blotten.

Alas, for the vain hopes of Gloria Pharo and of Fanny Bodie! As Lord Mellingham ceased to stroke his face in order to shave it, he beamed again at the thought of that divine creature in the well-appointed room at the end of the corridor. Was she, he wondered, thinking of him at that moment with the joy of wondrous revelation in her eyes.

At that moment no, it must be confessed, she was not. At that moment she was endeavouring vainly to secure, with the inexpert assistance of Minnie, some happy medium between an influx of literally boiling water through the pipe labelled "wave" and an intermittent downpour of petrifying chill from the "shower."

CHAPTER IV

IN the course of his brief journey between the station and the Hall, Henry Talboyes indulged in optimistic rehearsal of the appeal he was about to make to the lordly owner of the comfortable and rapid car. The chauffeur had unwittingly testified to the genial nature of his master, and, if Talboyes could but overcome his own tendency to shyness and confusion in stating his case, the only question would be as to whether he should accept a night's hospitality at the Hall, in lieu of the visitor who had failed to arrive, or whether he should prefer being set on his road to London. He repeated the preliminary words of explanation, which he had devised, several times to himself.

He also decided that, since there was a large number of guests at the Hall, he would ask to be conducted to his lordship, whom he hoped to be allowed to interview in private. He felt that, if he were called upon to stand and deliver his explanation before a large crowd of strangers in full dress, there was a possibility of his forgetting his words and look-

ing an ass. On the other hand, he felt confident that a few moments quiet conversation with his lordship would settle the whole difficulty; and Talboyes leant back against the soft cushions of the car and murmured his part to himself with increasing confidence.

That day had witnessed a remarkable transformation in the appearance of the drawing-room at Meltingham Hall. A small army of domestics, with Wattle in command and William and Francis as company commanders, had stripped the room of the greater part of the furniture, and had reverently rolled up the spacious carpet. Lord Mellingham, who was opposed to half-measures in the matter of entertaining his guests, had ordered Wattle to invent means whereby the surface of the floor should acquire the polish which he understood to be essential to the dance. His lordship had personally tested the result with more than one portion of his anatomy, and had pronounced it to be slippery. Mr. Harris had tested it and had described it as a coloured rink. Mrs. Tavistock had ventured a few yards and had congratulated Wattle, but suggested that he might even tone it down a trifle, and had herself superintended this process, while his lordship remained in the sanctuary of the doorway, encouraging her with a monotonous refrain of:

“Oh, thank you, dear lady, thank you. It distresses me to see you put to such trouble. Thank

you. Thank you. That will be much better now. I am so distressed that you should—thank you a thousand times. I am sure that will meet the case. Thank you again. Pray do not over-exert yourself. I am sure that cannot be improved upon now. Thank you so much. In this heat. *There* we are. Splendid! Thank you. No? Not quite as you would have it? Ah, but pray do not let us trouble you further. *That's* better. How can I ever thank you?"

At the moment when Henry Talboyes emerged from the interior of the car, and, having surveyed the marble pillars with a feeling of awe which drove every syllable of his introductory speech from his memory, was wafted into a state of still more abject indecision by a short ride on the tiger-skin, the drawing-room was occupied by four gentlemen who were almost as alien to the house as he. These were the members of what is commonly known as a "coon" or "jazz" band. Lord Mellingham, having been informed by his nephew that such an innovation would prove an asset to the success of the dance, had hastened to engage this quartet through an agency rival to that which had allowed his town friends the means for anticipatory complaint in the matter of the professional dancers. Sleeping accommodation for the band had been secured at the Plough Inn, and its members were now enjoying light refreshment in the drawing-room, before enter-

ing upon the drastic duties of the evening. Indeed, meals were being served in several quarters of the establishment. In the dining-room a sumptuous repast was in progress. Not only the house party but all the country guests of the occasion had been invited to partake of dinner before working off its effects in the exercise of dancing; while upstairs, in the double room which had been reserved for her, Mrs. Pauline Dipper was toying querulously with the delicate repast which apprehension forbade her to enjoy.

For at the stated hour and by the pre-appointed train, Mrs. Pauline Dipper had arrived alone. Examined as to the non-appearance of her husband, she admitted reluctantly that she had "lost track of Hank for the moment." She asserted definitely, however, that Hank was fully aware of his engagement to appear at the Hall that evening, and expressed the conviction that he would come in time to fulfil it, though whether he would make the journey by rail or by road she could not say. The mistrust of Mr. Harris and Mrs. Appleby, who nearly succeeded in swallowing her cigarette-holder during the interview at which she made a point of being present, was rather mollified by the suggestion that this hired dancer was in the habit of motoring into the depths of the country in order to entertain his patrons. Moreover, Mrs. Dipper's personal appearance dis-

armed the criticisms of all the male connoisseurs among Lord Mellingham's London friends by being what Mr. Harris described, in a brief but suggestive aside, as "All right."

But the evening had run its course and night was at hand, and as yet no Hank had made his appearance. His absence threatened to cast a pall of gloom over the whole household. The agitated Lord Mellingham turned in despair to Mrs. Tavistock for succour, appearing to regard her in the light of a Sibyl, who could summon Hank in much the same way as he himself was wont to summon his hot water. The dejected sympathy of his country visitors was almost as irksome to him as the cynical banter of the Londoners. The depression of the noble host was so marked that it could scarcely fail to affect every one with whom he came in contact.

Hence that cry of enthusiasm which had greeted Talboyes when the chauffeur had found him languishing in the cow-shed. Hence the wink of triumph with which the same agent handed him over to Francis at the front door, and the little gasp of relief with which the footman received him. Hence the unquestioning ardour which moved Francis to proceed rapidly in advance, to inform Mr. Wattle of Hank's belated arrival. Hence the fact that Henry Talboyes had time to collect the papers from the floor of the outer hall, after trying to carry his

bag over the tiger-skin, without being observed.

The papers had been regained and replaced in the bag by the time that Wattle had made his way to the doorway of the Armorial Hall. He had issued careful injunctions as to the attitude of the Hall servants towards these professional persons from London. "The Christy Minstrel party, who does the band-playing part of the concern," he had directed, "are to be spoke to only when necessary and then with great aloofness. Though first cousin to monkeys, they are in no case to be treated jocular. The dancing persons are guests in the house, and the Old Bedroom has been set aside for them. They must consequently be 'andled in every way as the guests of his lordship *should* be 'andled."

Wattle regarded Talboyes' nervousness, which had by this time returned with almost paralysing force, as due partly to his consciousness of having been unpunctual and having given unnecessary trouble, and partly to his shyness of finding himself within the portals of one of the noble homes of the rich. The butler felt called upon, in the interests of his lordship, to do his utmost to restore the confidence of this professional person, whom he secretly despised not a little.

"Ho, yes. Good evening, sir," he began.

"Good evening," said Talboyes. "May I see his lordship?"

Wattle, who felt inclined to reply, "Not until you have recovered your calm," temporized by remarking:

"You missed your train, I understand?"

"Yes, oh yes," answered Talboyes with a sigh, "I missed my train."

"'Owever."

"No, not however. You see——"

"I beg your pardon?" said Wattle, perplexed by this strange, impetuous man.

"Could I see his lordship at once?" cried Talboyes imploringly.

"His lordship has not yet finished his dinner, sir."

"Dinner!" Talboyes repeated the word wistfully to himself.

"I will inform his lordship of your arrival," said Wattle, indicating one of the chairs of the inner hall, and beginning to move majestically towards the door of the dining-room.

"Yes—er—but—but don't—you won't do anything to—to ruffle him, will you?" said Talboyes, following. "Because——"

Wattle turned and smiled soothingly. This excitable person must, he felt, be calmed down into a condition of tranquility befitting one of his lordship's guests.

"On the contrary, sir," he said gently. "His lordship was growing anxious about you, and will now

be only too pleased to hear of your arrival notwithstanding."

"Notwithstanding—yes, that's the point."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I hope," continued Talboyes, with a gallant attempt at fortitude, "that his lordship is—is in his usual capital form?"

"I was not aware that you was personally acquainted, sir," said Wattle, with a touch of resentment.

"No, no, I'm not," replied Talboyes hastily. "But everybody knows that he's such a particularly kind-hearted man. He has that reputation on all sides—popular with high and low."

Wattle made a short bow, as though in acknowledgment of a compliment which he did not relish, and, merely saying, "I will inform his lordship of your arrival," proceeded towards the dining-room. As he opened the door, the hum of conversation within was audible, and Talboyes listened to it with eager apprehension. There were evidently many diners. He might be bidden to enter the room to stand in all his shame before that awe-inspiring tribunal and to blurt out his confession. The idea sent a cold thrill of horror down his spine. He glanced at the hall door. Should he seize his bag and bolt? Too late. Francis was already prepar-

ing to put that unreliable article to the test of being conveyed upstairs.

"Hi!" cried Talboyes. "What are you doing with that bag?"

"I was only going to take it to your room, sir."

"Leave it alone," commanded Talboyes in panic.

Francis raised his eyebrows and replaced the bag on the floor.

"Thank you very much," said Talboyes, recovering himself. "Don't please trouble about it, that's all."

"Oh, it's no trouble, sir," said Francis, picking the bag up again.

"Don't touch it," repeated Talboyes. "I'm very much obliged to you, all the same. But I don't want it upstairs."

"Very good, sir," said Francis, still holding the bag. "But where would you like it put?"

"Don't put it," replied Talboyes, gesticulating nervously. "It won't stand putting about. I'll put it myself, if it's got to be put."

"Oh, just as you please, sir," said Francis sadly.

"Yes, thanks," said Talboyes with a conciliatory smile. "You see it's weak at the harsp."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"All right. You needn't do that. Only do just let the thing be."

An increased hubbub of conversation from the din-

ing-room, as Wattle reopened the door, here distracted Talboyes' attention from Francis and the bag. Wattle's announcement seemed to have had a most encouraging effect upon the party within. Wattle himself confirmed this.

"His lordship is very pleased to hear that you have arrived," he stated.

"Was that his lordship I heard laughing when the door was open?" asked Talboyes.

"It was," said Wattle.

Talboyes rubbed his hands.

"He seems in excellent form," he said.

"His lordship says that you are to be shown to your room to dress, sir."

"Ah, yes, but—no—yes, you see—no——" said Talboyes, showing considerable agitation.

"The footman will show you the way," said Wattle, with polite insistence. "Take that bag, Francis."

"No, no, Francis, remember," said Talboyes warningly. "I'm afraid," he continued, turning to Wattle, "that I can't dress. You see——"

"Ho, haven't you brought your dress clothes with you, sir?" said Wattle, glancing with some suspicion at the bag.

"I—er—I've lost them," replied Talboyes. "But that isn't the point exactly. I want to see his lordship undressed."

"I'm afraid I don't quite catch your meaning," said Wattle coldly.

"I mean—I, undressed, want. This is the point. I can't dress until I've seen his lordship. I want to explain."

Wattle scratched his chin.

"Per'aps," he said, "his lordship would see you at once if——"

"No, no," cried Talboyes. "I should hate to disturb his lordship in the middle of his dinner. It might disagree with him."

"Would you not care for me to ask his lordship whether he would not care for you to step in and see him? His lordship would very likely have no objection to waive formality——"

"But *I* should," said Talboyes firmly. "I've the very strongest objection to—to waiving formalities. I should be the last person to agree to going in there and that sort of thing."

"Well, sir, then I had better go and inform his lordship that you have lost your clothes and have arrived without any."

"Yes, only make it quite clear that you are only referring to my dress clothes. At the same time I'd very much rather wait and see his lordship myself——"

"I think it quite probable, sir, that rather than not have your—your society, his lordship will see

whether he can't lend you some clothes. You are very nearly of his lordship's build and——"

"Yes, thanks. When I see him I'll—we shall be able to——" Talboyes hesitated.

"I think, sir," said Wattle paternally, "that I had best go and tell his lordship just how it is."

"But I tell you, I want to see him, myself," said Talboyes desperately.

"I'll see that that's all right, sir," said Wattle with a soothing smile, as he returned once more to the dining-room.

A voice at Talboyes' shoulder caused him to start guiltily. But it was only that of the chauffeur.

"Can you tell me, sir, please, whether you will be taking the car out again to-night, or not?"

"Not yet," said Talboyes.

"I know you won't be wanting it *yet*, sir," said the chauffeur, "but—early in the morning, perhaps?"

"Early in the morning? Good heavens, no."

"Oh, you won't, sir? Very good. Thank you!"

"No. Yes. That is, perhaps," said Talboyes. "I—it hasn't been quite decided yet."

Again the sounds of hilarity burst forth from within the dining-room. Wattle, leaving the apartment, found Talboyes standing in great trepidation on each foot in turn, and suspected him of practising in the Armorial Hall.

"His lordship," he announced with finality, "de-

sires me to convey you to his room, sir, and to look you out some clothes."

"Wait a moment," said Talboyes. "Was that his lordship's voice I heard just now, when the door was open, saying something about not impeding my movements?"

"I think, sir, that his lordship was referring, jocular, to his lordship's trousers."

"But I don't want to wear his trousers," declared Talboyes impatiently.

"Oh, he don't mind, sir."

"But I really do wish to stay and see his lordship, apart from his trousers—I mean——"

At this moment a young man, in immaculate evening dress, came dashing out of the dining-room and confronted the wretched Talboyes with a broad grin. Talboyes, feeling that the time had arrived when he must summon all his most appealing qualities to the test of making a clear and solicitous statement of his misfortunes, smiled back with considerable effort.

"Good evening," said the young man. "Glad you've turned up."

"Yes—er——"

"Somebody suggested that you probably hadn't had any dinner."

"It's exceedingly kind of your lordship, but——"

"His, you mean."

"His?"

"*His* lordship," explained the young man. "I'm not his lordship, thank the Lord."

He laughed gaily, and even Wattle indulged in a bland smile.

"Oh," cried Talboyes, greatly agitated, "you're not his lordship, thank the Lord—his lord—his ship-load—lordship."

"No, I'm only his nephew. My name's Dollery."

"I wish," thought Talboyes, "that he'd tell me what his lordship's name is."

"We'll send some grub up to you, if you like," continued Peter. "You are going up to dress, aren't you? So I expect that will be the best arrangement."

"I—I—I haven't got any dress clothes, you know—and as a matter of fact, I——"

"Yes, but that's all right," said Peter. "Haven't you heard? The old sport is lending you some."

Wattle blushed.

"Yes, oh yes," said Talboyes. "But until I've seen the old sp—sportship, lordsport——"

"I'm sure," said Peter with rather a mandatory air, "that you want to do all you can to please my uncle now that you *have* turned up. And really the best way to go about it will be for you to go upstairs as I suggest and get into his things and have some food."

"Of course I—I—I am only too anxious to please

your uncle in every possible way," replied Talboyes, "and I am also quite prepared, in fact, extremely delighted, to get into his food—I mean——"

"That's right," said Peter. "Wattle will show you the way up."

"Oh, but I must see your lordship—his—alone, because he's under an entirely false impression about me, and——"

"That's all right," said Peter, "*quite* all right. He won't mind having been put to a little trouble and anxiety. But, if you hope to get on the right side of him now, I really advise you to do what he asks you to. So trot upstairs and get on with the job, there's a good fellow." He turned briskly and opened the door to the dining-room. In the doorway he halted and added: "The gentleman will change in his lordship's room, Wattle. But you'd better take his food to his own room."

"Oh, well," reflected Talboyes to himself, as this swift youth disappeared, "I may as well feed off these people. If they simply refuse to let me explain what has happened, that's their look-out. Besides, I shall probably feel in better form for bearding the old lord after I've got some dinner inside me." During which soliloquy he mechanically picked up his bag, despite the efforts of Wattle to precede him in this office, and began to mount the stairs, following the superintending figure of the butler.

"Now this," said the latter, halting before a door on the first floor landing, "is his lordship's dressing-room. I will come back here and see what I can find for you to put on. But first, no doubt, you would like to see your own room which is that one at the end of the passage. The lady is there."

"The—the lady?"

"Yes, *your* lady, sir."

"Good God, but——"

Wattle allowed himself a playful little wag of the head.

"Don't you worry, sir," he said in a very confidential manner. "Nobody can help missing a train, and I'm sure the lady will forget she was ever worried about you now she sees you've arrived safe and sound."

"I bet she won't," murmured the luckless Talboyes in an undertone.

Wattle knocked at the door of the Old Bedroom. A plaintive, "Oh, come in," was the response. Wattle came in. He appreciated the opportunity for performing his duty in accordance with the best traditions of the old and pacifying family butler of the drama. He threw open the door, peered for a moment within, announced in hollow, supplicatory tones, "Your husband, madam," turned, inviting Talboyes to enter, in a manner so encouraging as practically to amount to pushing him into the room, and closing

the door behind the reclaimed husband, departed jubilantly to look out his lordship's second-best dress clothes.

The dark, sharp, active eyes, which met his, would, at any time, have flashed a quick appeal to a man so vulnerable as Henry Talboyes. Now, as they grew wide in astonishment and brighter still in sudden challenge, he stood transfixed. From her eyes his attentive glance took rapid stock of all the alluring features which contributed to the enchanting apparition of Pauline Dipper, as she half raised herself from the divan upon which she had been reclining and faced the intruder with unguarded defiance. She was small, but her figure was exquisitely modelled. Her features were clear-cut and sensitive, as becomes the brunette. Her hair had been done in Grecian style, and a band of silver lay across her forehead. In other respects her toilet had not been fully completed. The dress in which she was to appear at the dance still remained in its coverlet of tissue paper upon the bed. A pink and mauve wrapper of *crêpe de Chine* hung from her shoulders, its abbreviated sleeves displaying her long, white arms to full advantage. Nor did the black silk petticoat extend unduly, and it was possible to esteem the shapely outline of calf and instep, compressed in stockings of the same material. From the shoes, tiny shoes of black brocade, the eyes of Talboyes

again travelled upwards to meet hers, and read his complete subjugation in that expression of withering inquisition.

For several seconds after the dramatic entrance of the intruder she remained silent, modestly testing the security of the clasp which held the wrapper at her breast. Then, in a dispassionate but querulous voice she said:

"But—you're not my husband."

Talboyes dropped his eyes again to the neat, lissom fingers busy with the clasp.

"I'm sorry," he replied.

Pauline Dipper raised herself another foot on the divan, and with her disengaged hand attempted to make her silk petticoat appear of normal length.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "What's all this?" Her frown deepened as she perceived Henry Talboyes watching the petticoat manoeuvre with undisguised curiosity. "How dare you come here and pretend to be my husband?"

"I—I didn't," said Talboyes. "Everybody seems to think I'm somebody else except you. You're the only person who knows who I am."

"But I haven't the faintest notion who you are."

"I mean—who knows who I'm not."

"I know you're not my husband, anyway," said Pauline.

"You're the only person who does," repeated Tal-

boyes with emphatic haste. "Everybody's under a delusion. I myself didn't know till a moment ago that you were my wife—I mean weren't. I didn't know I had a wife."

"You needn't trouble to be funny," said Pauline sharply.

"I didn't know I was funny," said Talboyes humbly.

"Well, now tell me something you *do* know. Why are you here instead of my husband? Did he send you?"

"I don't even know who your husband is."

"You don't know an awful lot, don't you?"

"Ye—no. Oh, please don't ask such intricate questions," appealed Talboyes. "I'll explain everything in a minute."

"People who don't know anything generally try and do that," was Pauline's rather nasal comment.

"Would you be so kind as to tell me who your husband is? I feel that would help," said Talboyes.

"Hank P. Dipper. Why are you putting that bag down in my room?"

"Hank? Because, if you don't mind, it's so heavy and I've had a most dreadful time with the beastly thing all the evening. Hank?"

"Yes, Hank P. Dipper. The great Hank P. Dipper."

"The *great* one?"

"Did you ever hear of more than one?"

"No, I never even—I mean the—the great one is the—the only—well, the only one I've ever heard of—that is to say I'm not quite sure that I—of course I'm not much up in Society, you know, and I don't know that I——"

"For goodness' sake," interrupted Pauline, "don't keep on saying 'I don't know.'"

"I didn't say *you* didn't know," remonstrated Talboyes. "I'm sure you can throw much more light upon this mistake than I can. If you wouldn't mind telling me more about your husband——"

"I suppose," said Pauline with a sigh, "that you have heard of Hank and Pauline Dipper?"

"Oh, Pauline?"

"That's me, of course."

"Oh, I see. Pauline, that's you. Then who's Hip—Hanker?"

"Hank? Why, my husband."

"Ah," said Talboyes, taking a step towards her and raising a demonstrative finger, "Now, I'm getting at it. Then I'm Hank?"

"You're certainly not," said Pauline, again quickly on the defensive with her petticoat.

"No, but they think I am."

"Who do?"

"The people here," cried Talboyes, in eager ex-

planation. "All these butlers and chauffeurs and footmans—feetmen—foot——"

"Why did you let them?" asked Pauline severely. "Did you want them to believe that you were my husband?"

"They wanted to, themselves—I'm very sorry. You're the first person I've met who seems to raise any objection to my being your husband. I'm very sorry."

Pauline Dipper turned her head and gazed through the window into the unknown where Hank yet lingered.

"So am I," she said bitterly, "*very* sorry. I wish you *were* my husband."

Talboyes was encouraged by this admission to seat himself near the divan and to regard Pauline with an air of confidential speculation.

"Really?" he said. "I say, what makes you wish that?"

Pauline, however, returned to the inquisition with a glare of small encouragement.

"You needn't think I'm satisfied about you yet," she remarked sternly, "because I'm not."

"No, no," returned Talboyes in a palliative tone. "After all, you have only known me for——"

"Look here," she interrupted, "You came in here and they thought you were Hank—is that it?"

Talboyes assented.

"Well, why didn't you say straight out, 'I'm not Hank'?"

"But how could I say straight out, 'I'm not Hank,' when I don't know anything about Hank?" argued Talboyes wildly.

"But you know that you're not Hank."

"Oh, hell—I beg your pardon."

"It's no use begging my pardon. I want to know the truth. You somehow or other got in here. They took you for Hank. Well, why didn't you put them wise?"

"Because I didn't know anything about you and your husband. I was just going to see the lordship—his."

"The lordship—his?"

"Yes, yes, his lordship—the owner of this place—the old man—your host—the old lord—surely you——"

"Well?"

"Then I was going to tell his lordship that, though everybody thought I was your husband, I wasn't really your husband at all, but——"

"How could you tell him you weren't my husband, when you say you didn't know anything about my husband?"

Talboyes leant back in his chair and wiped his brow.

"I know there's an answer to that," he groaned, "but you've muddled me so much that I can't think for the moment what it is."

The frowning severity in her eyes was softened by a passing gleam of amusement, as they studied the expression of innocent, struggling perplexity in his round red face. Pauline knew men pretty well by this time. She had encountered many diversified examples of the species in a brief but vagrant experience, and how few of them—how few even of the most plausible and the most amiable—had been genuine and disinterested? But as she scanned Henry Talboyes with that faint cynical smile of amusement, she judged him rightly to be an exception to the usual type of misunderstood, propitiatory gentleman, who is one of the most common types known to fair collectors. There was something undeniably genuine in his nervous inability to explain his false position, and his rather eccentric vacuity was as obviously a true part of his nature as the docility and kindness of heart which Pauline read in every line of his face. She could play with this man as with a toy, could command, coerce, bully him as she pleased. She knew the way, and, after all, he might be useful.

"There's something very fishy about you," she said.

"Wait a moment," replied Talboyes, "I remember now. I was going to tell the old lord who I was,

and to ask for his help because I'd lost the last train to London."

"But why?"

"Well, if you must know, it was due to a porter flying a kite instead of attending to his duty. But I shouldn't worry about that, because——"

"Flying a kite? What has that got to do with my husband?"

"Nothing at all. That's what I say—if you start to worry about the kite we shall only get more involved than we are at present, if that's possible. You see, the chauffeur was at the station, looking for Hicks—Huck——"

"What has the chauffeur got to do with it?"

"A great deal; in fact, he's really at the bottom of all the trouble."

"I thought you said the porter was at the bottom of the trouble."

"Well, the porter was responsible for my losing the train, but——"

"Then why blame the chauffeur?"

"Because the chauffeur was the man who brought me here."

"Oh, are you sorry you came here, then?"

"Well, that's not a very fair question."

"If you're not sorry, you can't very well blame the porter; and, if you are sorry you came here, I

think you ought not to have let the chauffeur bring you. You must be fair."

"But don't you see the chauffeur saw me and thought I was H—him."

"Him?"

"Your husband. And, as I say, not knowing your husband, I couldn't undeceive him."

"But surely you could have told the chauffeur that you weren't coming here at all."

"I did, time after time, but the fool simply refused to let me go. He also said the old lord would most probably lend me a car or a bed, so I came. Well, directly I put my nose inside the door, old butlers and nephews and people kept dashing up and thinking me Hank—is that his name? In fact, as I say, you alone know that I'm not."

Pauline grew suddenly more animated as the true significance of the situation was brought home to her.

"Do you mean to say that all those people downstairs solemnly believe that Mr. Dipper has arrived?"

"Yes, the butler told the old lord so. I tried to stop him but couldn't. The butler is the biggest fathead I've ever encountered. In fact, he's really at the bot—well, anyhow, he's responsible for a great deal of all this muddle. For one thing, he worried me into coming up here to put on the old lord's clothes."

"I hope you don't think you're going to start changing your clothes in this room?" said Pauline.

"No, I'm going to do that in the old lord's dressing-room; that is, I'm not going to do it anywhere, really. But it was no use my trying to tell the butler that. If the old lord turns out to be as pig-headed as his servants he'll probably refuse to see me until I've dressed up in his things, and then I suppose he'll want to know what the dickens I've done it for."

"What about *me*?" said Pauline in an injured tone. "You don't seem to consider my feelings very much, I must say."

"I haven't thought of anything but you ever since I've been in this room," he assured her gravely. "I don't see how anybody could."

"Never mind what *you* think," said Pauline. "What about *me*?" She turned her head, rested her chin in her hand, and appeared to be on the point of bursting into tears. "Oh, it's cruel—cruel," she whispered.

Talboyes leant towards her in pendent commiseration, but she drew back from him.

"I say, I'm really very, very sorry," he pleaded. "It wasn't meant to be cruel—cruel."

After a moment's pause, Pauline proceeded to state her mournful case.

"I waited so long for Hank, and hoped—and then

at last I hear the good news that he has arrived. And, instead of my husband dashing into the room as I expected, what do I find?"

"What?" repeated Talboyes with curiosity.

"When everything depends on Hank getting here tonight——" she turned almost fiercely on Talboyes, —"look what arrives."

Talboyes jerked his chin with a faint suggestion of forgotten dignity.

"Tastes vary, of course," he said. "Still, however fine a specimen Hank may be, I don't think you need go on referring to me as 'what'."

"If only you knew what trouble and anxiety I am in," continued Pauline, intertwining her fingers apprehensively, "you wouldn't try to make a mock of me."

"I swear I'm not trying to make a mock. I can't bear to see you so distressed. If I'd known you were really likely to take it so much to heart I would have resisted that old fool of a butler by brute force."

"It might not have been quite so bad if the man who came instead of Hank had been bright and amusing and had made some suggestions to me," said Pauline with a kindling eye.

"Made some suggestions to you?" echoed Talboyes incredulously.

"Yes. Here am I without my husband. I am

sure, to judge by your manner, that you know more than you pretend to. Don't you now?"

Talboyes smiled self-consciously.

"Well, really," he said, "I think I know what you mean, but it's hardly a subject I am accustomed or desire to——"

"Don't consider my feelings," interrupted Pauline keenly. "I am absolutely without trace of my husband, and I want to know everything *you* know. You say you want to be kind to me, here's your chance."

"Certainly, within limits," said Talboyes.

His stubborn manner only served further to influence Pauline's sudden conviction that he could impart news—possibly bad news—of the husband upon whom all her thoughts were centred. She became almost wheedling in her anxiety to test this theory.

"Ah," she said, "I know there is sympathy behind those kind eyes of yours."

"Yes, there is," replied Talboyes more warmly.

"Yes. You needn't be afraid of what you tell me. I have an idea that you are preparing to tell me something shocking."

"I say, really. I—I——"

"Don't trouble to be soft with me."

"I'm not soft at all," said Talboyes in expostulation.

"Yes, yes, you are," said Pauline feelingly. "But,

if you are really sorry for me, do what I ask. If you have heard anything dreadful this evening, tell it to me. I am sure you are anxious to make things as pleasant for me as possible, but please don't let's have any more of your silly stories. Tell me the worst you know."

"Really," murmured Talboyes, in great discomfiture, "I'm prepared to do almost anything for beauty in distress, but—is this the only way you have of getting cheered up?"

"I don't want to be cheered up. Do you or do you not know where my husband is?"

"Your husband? No, I haven't the slightest idea."

"Have you or have you not heard of anything that has happened to him?"

"I haven't indeed."

Pauline, with a heavy sigh, relapsed again on to the divan.

"Well, then," she cried, "can't you see that I'm down on my luck? For goodness' sake do what you can to assist me. Don't be so restrained. I want you to take me into your confidence. I must have somebody to fall back upon. Be a little brighter, do. Make suggestions to me."

Talboyes, who was endeavouring to recollect some of the least objectionable of his limited stock of *risqué* stories, gained time by remarking that she was

an extraordinary woman and that he did not feel any justification for encouraging her abnormal propensities. At which he detected the sound of a sob from her averted face.

"I simply don't know what to say," he confessed, scratching his head. "It's really awfully embarrassing to me—this sort of thing. Still, I suppose you must be a woman of the world, or you wouldn't give such bold expression to your rather extraordinary whims. I expect you know that one about 'There was a young woman of Barking'?"

Pauline raised her head and glared in astonishment.

"What on earth are you talking about?" she exclaimed. "If you can't behave like a gentleman—"

"You particularly asked me *not* to behave like a gentleman. I——"

"Do you, for the last time, know anything about my husband?"

"No, I do not, and I'm only too pleased to hear that it's for the last time."

"Then kindly get out."

"Wait a moment," said Talboyes. "We may have misunderstood each other, and here comes my dinner."

Sure enough, Wattle, on being bidden to enter, heralded the approach of Francis, who bore along a miniature of the tea-stand. As he wheeled this into

the room, Wattle stood and surveyed the reconciled Dippers with gratified eyes.

"The clothes are all ready in his Lordship's room, sir," he announced, "but no doubt you will prefer to take your dinner first, while 'ot."

"Er—yes, I should like my dinner while hot," replied Talboyes, with a stealthy side-glance at Mrs. Dipper.

Wattle bowed.

"Should you fail to find anything you require when you come to dress, sir, will you kindly either ring or phone?" he requested as he left.

Francis, however, remained rigidly at attention, until Talboyes turned open-mouthed in his direction, when he asked:

"What will you take with it, sir? Champagne?"

"Yes, oh yes, I can do with some champagne," replied Talboyes.

When the footman had retired, Talboyes turned with an apology to Pauline and inquired whether she had any objection to his feeding before getting out, as he was in a state of ravenous hunger and the chance seemed too good to miss. She replied with a shrug and a shake of the head, and Talboyes settled to his meal with that sharp intake of the breath which characterizes the hungry man inspecting an ample board.

CHAPTER V

AFTER a few moments Henry Talboyes raised his eyes from his plate to the ceiling, as though returning thanks to the mature goddess and her attendant cherubim who were disporting upon that surface. Then he again turned to Pauline.

"You said something just now about how you wished me to be brighter and to assist you in falling back upon me. I didn't quite grasp your meaning at the time, but I'm beginning to feel better now, and I hope I may be allowed to try again; so please tell me exactly what the trouble is. I say, please do. I can't bear to see you distressed."

"I shall go on being distressed," replied Pauline in a sulky tone, "until I have news of Hank."

She rose as she spoke, and sweeping across to the window drew aside the lace curtain, and scanned the view of drive and terrace for any signs of the absentee. Talboyes glanced at her neat figure from his seat at the writing-table, which Francis had spread for the repast, and again settled himself to the enjoyment of that welcome booty.

"Hank's all right," he said. "I'm sure he is. Don't you worry. All I've told you is perfectly true. I'm here, and they think I'm Hank. This soup is awfully good."

"It sounds good," said Pauline critically.

"Yes," went on Talboyes good-humouredly, "I'm getting on splendidly. My only regret is that you are unhappy."

Pauline returned from the window and stood near him, her pretty fingers drumming on the edge of his table.

"You'd be unhappy," she said, "if you were faced with disaster like I am."

"Disaster, no!" replied Talboyes cheerfully. "Hank has simply lost his way. You'll find him again."

She shook her head.

"Unless I find him now, I'm done for, don't you see?"

Talboyes looked up at her gravely, his brimming spoon poised dangerously in mid-air.

"I can only suppose that you say that, because you're such an extraordinary affectionate wife," he said. "In your eyes, any man but Hank is a mere 'what.'"

"Well, I hope so," she replied. "But it's not my love I'm thinking of at the moment; it's my pocket."

"Your wocket—pot it—what?" cried Talboyes, spilling soup.

"My pocket," repeated Pauline, who was growing more friendly by rapid stages, and now seated herself close beside him. "Don't you understand that we are paid to come here?"

"Who are?"

"Why, Hank and me. If Hank doesn't show up we shall lose our fee, and I want it. I want it badly. In fact, I promised things to my *costumier* to-morrow on the strength of it."

This revelation entirely baffled Henry Talboyes, who was not at the best of times a man of brilliantly intuitive nature. He could only surmise vaguely that these Dippers were persons of the highest fashion, who would only consent to descend and illumine a dull country house-party for a substantial secret consideration. The old lord who had contrived the household improvements and decorations, which Talboyes had noted with awestruck repugnance at every turn, would be just such a one as to seek this means of infusing a dour country gathering with a touch of town colour. Moreover, Talboyes seemed to recollect having read, in one of the gossipy weekly papers, of a recent date, of such a practice being prevalent. At the same time, he was puzzled. Mrs. Dipper, though certainly a smart, almost, he thought, a flashy little woman, betrayed in her voice, and less

definitely in her whole personality, those slight but damning deficiencies which must surely impair her efforts to patronize the ladies of the house-party. Besides, why the dickens should she be dining alone in her room? That seemed a glaring breach of contract. Talboyes murmured "Come in," in a tone of perplexed invocation, as though Francis were the God of Reason and the champagne he brought some mystic potion of Enlightenment.

Francis delivered his potion and slid noiselessly away. Talboyes partook heartily. He approved the brand. That such a wine should be served up without question or restraint only increased his wonder. He turned to Pauline with a rather more arbitrary air. He meant to find out all about this. Hang it all, he had a right to. He was Hank Dipper.

"And do you mean to tell me that one can get paid for coming here and doing this?" he asked, indicating the champagne.

"Of course. What do you think?"

"Well, I thought I knew a thing or two," he said, with a

"But now," said Pauline, "I shall forfeit my fee and my expenses and everything, just because Hank hasn't found his way."

"Yes, I'm beginning to think less of Hank's acumen than I did," agreed Talboyes with a nod.

"Tell me, when you speak of your fee, I—I suppose you—er—you charge for—for coming and—well, sort of helping the old lord out with his party, entertaining them and—well, being a sort of extra attraction, as it were, and showing 'em how the thing is done by the best people?"

"That's it exactly," said Pauline. "But you don't suppose that we do it for nothing?"

"No, I don't suppose it would be worth your while."

"Worth our while? I should think not——"

"No, no, of course not, of course not," said Talboyes quickly. "I have heard of people in the country having down celebrities of—of your sort from London," he added carelessly, "but I suppose it's not very much done?"

"No, not very much," she replied. "Occasionally, of course, one gets an offer from a house of this sort."

"From a house of *this* sort, exactly," said Talboyes, viewing the pretentious upholstery of the room with a critical sniff.

"But this will be an awful blow for our reputation," said Pauline. "We shall never get taken on anywhere else after this."

"Oh, but surely Society is not so strict as all that?"

"It is, in our crowd."

"You surprise me intensely," said Talboyes. "But I suppose it depends a good deal on what Hank is doing. And, even if this does result in his getting the reputation of being a bit of a lad, I should think that will be advantageous to you rather than otherwise. Old ladies in the country may shake their heads over him, but they won't lose a chance of dining with him. By the way, don't you as a rule dine with the other people?"

"No, not as a rule," replied Pauline.

"I'm surprised at that, too. I should have thought that was about the first thing you'd be called upon to do."

"Why? Do you think we should be expected to dance on the table?"

"No, but without resorting to extremes, you might serve to brighten up what is sure to be a pretty dull affair."

"In any case," said Pauline, "you needn't imply that Hank is getting into any mischief, because I'm sure he's not."

"I daresay not," replied Talboyes. "But he must have some fairly powerful inducement to keep him away from a job like this." He tasted his champagne as he spoke.

"He's lost his way, that's all," said Pauline, "but it's a crying shame, when I want that money so badly."

"But, surely to goodness, you'll get your share of the money?" said Talboyes.

Pauline shook her head.

"Unless he turns up, I shan't appear at all," she said. "I can't do anything on my own, without him."

Talboyes knit his brows.

"Does he exercise some weird influence over you, or something?" he asked.

"Don't be so silly," said Pauline, turning from the table with a little shake of the shoulders. "How could I carry on alone? I shouldn't have the face to try."

"Everything you tell me surprises me more than the last," said Talboyes. Then seeing her attitude of depression, he added. "I say, try a drop of this. It's wonderful stuff. It has made me feel a different man already."

"Thank you," said Pauline, taking a good sip of the champagne.

"Not at all," said Talboyes, watching her with solicitude.

"That's better," he proceeded, as she returned the glass with a smile of gratitude. "Don't you worry, now. Hank will be able to explain quite nicely next time he sees the old lord."

"But he doesn't know him," said Pauline. "That's just the worst of it. If we were former acquaint-

ances of the old lord's we might be able to wangle something."

"Good Lord!" said Talboyes, thoughtfully. "Yes, now I come to think of it, that chauffeur said something about my being a total stranger."

"I'm not talking about you, I'm talking about Hank," said Pauline.

"So am I. To the chauffeur I am Hank. To everybody here I am Hank. The consideration of your particular trouble had quite driven the thought from my head."

"Oh, you can explain and put things right for yourself," said Pauline, "but I can't. If only I had a friend to stand by me!"

Her voice broke and she relapsed once more upon the divan, and buried her face in her hands.

"I haven't a friend in the place—besides all the anxiety," came in broken accents. "If I knew anybody here it might be easier."

Talboyes was already standing beside her, with one hand holding the glass of champagne and the other stretched out tentatively towards the beautiful, drooping neck of the weeping lady.

"Easier?" he cried. "No, by George. Wait a moment. Oh, please don't cry."

"I can't help it—I'm done for."

"Done for? I don't follow you. Do you really mean to say that the old lord won't stump up this

fee you speak of unless your husband is here with you?"

"Of course he won't."

"The old lord doesn't seem to be taking any risks," said Talboyes.

"Is that what you call being kind?"

Talboyes bent further over her. His hand was laid gently on her shoulder.

"If you will only stop crying," he said, "I'll be so kind to you that you won't miss Hank a scrap."

Pauline slowly raised her eyes. They were remarkably dry for the eyes of a lady in such affliction.

"I say," she whispered, as though possessed by a sudden inspiration, "isn't it a pity that you're not qualified to take Hank's place?"

Talboyes drew back, more piqued than scandalized by the suggestion.

"But—but I—I consider I *am* qualified, if it comes to that," he said.

"You're not a—an expert, are you?" inquired Pauline, with greatly animated interest.

"Depends what you call an expert," replied Talboyes rather stiffly. "I've—er—I've been accustomed to move in quite decent society, and I think I can do pretty well all that is required of me."

"Can you honestly?" She reflected with bright eyes. "All these people here think you're Hank," she said wistfully. "Really it seems almost a pity

that they shouldn't go on thinking it. Do you think you could go on being Hank, just for the time being?"

Talboyes massaged his lower jaw and reviewed her entreating countenance with great indecision.

"If you're really some good, I can pull you through," pursued Pauline.

"Oh, thank you," replied Talboyes. "It isn't that part I'm nervous about. But it would mean embarking upon a gross deception and——"

"Oh, go on," said Pauline. "Have another drop of that champagne. It will only be a bit of fun, and even when they find out it will only show that I did my best."

"M'yes," said Talboyes. "On the other hand, it may land us both in great difficulties. Some one here may have seen Hank, even if they don't know him."

"Very unlikely. Besides, if necessary I could always say that I asked you to take his place as an understudy, as it were, knowing what a disappointment it would be to every one."

"I don't think you need put it quite like that," said Talboyes. "As a matter of fact, I don't think I shall be a disappointment to anybody."

"You're not a professional yourself, are you?" she asked.

"Well, no, I can't say that I've ever actually been

paid to go to any of these places," replied Talboyes meditatively.

"Anyhow, you think you're pretty advanced?"

"I hope so; but, as I say, the point is that this is going to be a criminal undertaking and I really think it would be better——"

"So you would prefer me to lose my fee?"

"No, dash it, that's awfully unkind of you. How long are you here for?" said Talboyes, weakening.

"Just the one night, of course."

"Why 'of course,'? How was I to know? No, please don't start to weep again——"

"I expect it's for the best," sobbed Pauline. "You'd only go and give me away if we tried it on."

"I certainly shouldn't do that," replied Talboyes with dignity. "In fact, I don't mind betting that I'm quite Hank's equal, whoever he may be."

"They wouldn't think it was Hank, when they saw you," said Pauline.

"But they think so now," cried Talboyes, becoming quite heated and confused in his efforts to avoid being Hank, while boasting all that gentleman's qualities.

"Who think so?"

"I tell you, I've already imposed on them without wanting to; in fact, without intending to."

"Imposed on who?"

"Why all these showmen and footlers—shoot—bow—butlers and people. Everybody thinks I'm Hank. The point is——"

"The point is," interrupted Pauline, "that though you have deceived them all once, you want to throw your hand in rather than help me."

"Oh, don't weep," repeated Talboyes desperately. "Have a drop more of this."

"Thank you," said Pauline, taking the glass.

"Don't mention it," said Talboyes.

She took all that remained, then looked up again into his face with an alluring smile.

"Let's risk it," she said.

Talboyes met her eyes, took a deep breath and nodded very unwillingly. Pauline was on her feet in a second, an alert figure of vigorous mischief.

"You're a sport," she said. "It will be a bit of fun, you know, and it may come off well. If it comes off *really* well, no one will mind when we tell them that you're not Hank. But of course nobody must be told until right at the end of the evening, and only then if we've made a hit. I'm relying entirely on what you say about yourself. You really can carry it off?"

"With all modesty, I fail to see why not," replied Talboyes. "I shouldn't worry in the least if I felt as happy about the moral side of the impersonation as I do about the—the physical."

"Well," said Pauline, taking him by the shoulders and turning him towards the door, "the first thing is for you to go and put on those borrowed dress clothes. Then come straight back here to me, and we will put in a little practice before we go down. Now, don't go and get cold feet again while you're dressing."

Talboyes found himself being led to his fate by those gentle but compelling hands. He still attempted vainly to protest. He raised one of his own hands in remonstrance to hers upon his shoulder. It received a little squeeze of gratitude and encouragement from her strong fingers and he felt all the resistance knocked out of him. She *was* a fascinating little woman, he thought. Why should he refuse her what she described as a bit of fun? Why should he refuse himself the unusual stimulation of an experience full of the most piquant possibilities? In any case she had wept and he had made his vow, and the only course was to play his part in a manner which should command the admiration of the better half of the Dipper partnership. He still felt some doubt as to the rather mysterious functions which he had to perform. In this connection he managed to put a further question, as he allowed himself to be conveyed across the room.

"Practice? How do you mean exactly practice?" he asked. "Do you mean that we shall—go on in here

as if we were downstairs, and pretend that the other people are looking on?"

"Yes, of course. What do you suppose I mean by practice? Rehearse, if you prefer to call it that. I'll show you some of my latest stunts."

"What sort of stunts?" inquired Talboyes, with amused curiosity, as he paused in the doorway.

"Oh, I've got a new and very fetching sort of hesitation that I'll show you how I do, and one or two other rather neat things," said Pauline. "One of them is a very natty step, with one's middle well pushed out in front. You know. Quite the latest."

"By George!" said Talboyes, approvingly. "You certainly do the thing thoroughly."

"Well, one must," she replied. "I shouldn't get these engagements unless I kept right up to the times."

"N—o, I see. Is that it?" said Talboyes, nodding to his own thoughts. "But will anything very—very novel be required of *me*?"

"If you're as good as you say you are, you'll be able to pick it up quite easily," she replied.

Talboyes hesitated.

"It all depends on what you mean by good," he said. "I suppose that, with a little effort, I can make people think that I'm accustomed to appearing in the very best circles."

"That's exactly what's wanted," said Pauline encouragingly. She was already closing the door upon

him, and only her face, with an eager, seductive smile, remained within his vision. "Don't waste time now," she added. "And mind you come straight back here." The door was closely silently, but reopened again. "And mind you don't get talking to anybody if you can help it, until we've completed our plans. It might be dangerous, because I don't think you always say quite what you mean." Again the door closed, and again opened. Pauline's eyebrows were raised and she jerked her chin as though recalling her victim for further confidential instructions. Talboyes stooped and placed his ear on a level with the pretty, sensitive lips. "Don't be long away from me, will you?" she whispered. "And, I say—I think you are a dear."

Talboyes walked slowly down the passage. He fought down the protesting conscience which told him that he had consented to become a party to an action of the most deceitful and caddish nature, just because he lacked the strength of will to resist a woman's wiles. He tried to persuade himself that chivalry demanded this undertaking. He was merely indulging in a bit of fun after all. And she was a jolly, attractive little woman. She thought him a dear. What could any man do but make some effort on behalf of so compassionate an object? "Fool!" said his conscience. "A woman who openly boasts of carrying social artificiality to the point of culti-

vating an enticing hesitation of manner, a woman who trains herself to walk in public with her middle well pushed out in order to observe the latest fashionable extravagance of equivoise. Fool!"

Talboyes wandered far beyond his lordship's dressing-room in the course of these deliberations; and, indeed, only pulled himself together on finding himself half-way downstairs.

It is no easy matter to wander unobserved in such a house, where, in the first-floor shadows, lurk at all hours the forms of female servants. Talboyes' movements were watched with great interest; though it was, perhaps, the actual personality of the belated entertainer rather than his procedure that excited his observer's attention. It was not the furtive manner in which he halted on the staircase, retraced his steps, and, after testing Lord Mellingham's door as though he expected to be pounced upon from within, crept into that apartment, which brought Minnie open-mouthed from Mrs. Tavistock's room. It was the fact that the dancing gentleman, who had come late and had just emerged from a stormy interview with his wife, was no less a person than Mr. Henry Talboyes. For Minnie, who had stopped gaps all over the countryside in her time, had on more than one occasion performed that office in the establishment of Miss Starchfield of Coombe Puddy.

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The broad folding doors which connected the dining-room with the inner hall slid open—for in addition to the ordinary hinges they had been fitted with a device similar to that used on tube trains, which contrived their automatic disappearance laterally into recesses—and through the aperture poured the gay throng, jubilant now with unrestrained hilarity and unnecessary conversation. Their former despondency had evaporated under the influence of the banquet, to which the timely announcement of Hank's arrival had added a welcome fillip. The County ladies, who at the commencement of the evening had freely engaged in confidential deprecation of his lordship's town acquaintances and who would, no doubt, repeat on the morrow their opinion that it was a great pity that Lord Mellingham thought fit to invite those awful, munitioneery, profiteery people from London, were nevertheless displaying the most generous affability towards these undesirables for the time being. As the guests, male and female, left the dining-room *en masse* to enjoy a cigarette on the terrace before engaging in the whirl of the dance, the Babel of falsetto chatter and the fusion of brilliant colouring were calculated to bring a novel thrill of wonder and delight to the most blasé County daughter of the most hardened County dowager.

The guests were numerous and costly. The County

representatives, if ineligible for inclusion in Minnie's category, included some of the richest, the most animated and the most critical personages of the neighbourhood. Lady Pharo, of Deepcombe Magna, was in puce with a diamond star and drop-earrings which would have incurred the jealousy of the Queen of Sheba. She waggled them in conversational exhilaration into the appreciative face of Mr. Harris, as she sought the terrace. Her husband, Sir Enoch Pharo, having ceased to suck his teeth in order to suck champagne, was loudly recounting the strange story of how he had been forewarned in a dream of the result of the St. Leger in 1894 to several of his fellow guests, who were paying no attention to him but were engaged in strident conversation on their own account. Their daughter, Gloria Pharo, was there of course, green as a summer apple and smiling with green admiration at Mrs. Tavistock. Mr. Harry Pink was there, a great personality in Coombe Puddy, being one of those awfully large, jovial, hearty, dull, country gentlemen, who may be trusted to do the right thing in the wrong way. His sister, Miss Daphne Pink, was there. She was one of the local ladies who had aspired to a permanent position at the Hall, and wore a slightly patronizing air. Mrs. Duckingham Leape, Rumour's most eminent agent in this district, was there or thereabouts, busily engaged in mental valuation of her neighbours' dresses

and chattering with the irrelevant pertinacity of a parrot. Mrs. Buzzard Knowles was right there. Mr. Buzzard Knowles was somewhere there. All the purple and fine linen of a score of County families was displayed, admired, criticized, trodden on and apologized about. All their diamond heirlooms and pearl necklaces and precious stones flashed and sparkled everywhere beneath lamps of unlimited candle-power. Heads dark, fair, auburn, golden; heads of waved hair, of bobbed hair, of peroxide hair; heads enriched with bands of gold, of velvet, of gilt leaves, in one case of grapes—all were borne proudly yet with abandon through the doorway into the hall, accompanied by loftier but less conspicuous heads sleek with oil or shining with the radiance of the hairless epicure after doing himself justice. And loftiest and most relucient of all appeared the head of his lordship the host, his large face beaming with satisfaction at the favourable auspices gained by his copious libations of Pommery.

For this was the hour ordained by Lord Mellingham for his joyous claim. Ere this night had passed he would have revealed his passion and clasped the unpremeditating lady of his choice to his broad shirt-front. He noticed that several of his guests had, with feminine instinct, already scented his intentions. He had intercepted glances cast in Mrs. Tavistock's direction by such connoisseurs as Lady

Pharo, Miss Pink and Miss Blanche Scollop, which betrayed their emotions even to his unpractised eye. He contemplated his lady-love stealthily, as he accompanied her from the room. He had every reason to feel proud of his find. True, her dress was less brilliant in hue than those affected by some of his respected friends—this was only to be expected in a widow—but her grey satin gown ornamented with sequins was worn with an elegance which even Miss Withers, who was decked in scarlet with other delights, failed to rival. No grapes encircled Mrs. Tavistock's brow, and such jewellery as she wore could not hope to vie with some of the magnificent stones displayed around her. Throughout the dinner she had maintained her charming ease of demeanour. She had been less boisterous, perhaps than the majority, but was not accustomed, as Lord Mellingham judiciously guessed, to dinner parties of such dimensions. Her spirits would rise as she gained experience of his mode of hospitality. And if, for a moment, Lord Mellingham felt in his mind a passing sensation of perplexity that one so modest, so unused to all the glamour of high living as she, should have stolen his carefully tended affections, the shadowy doubt was dispelled by a glance into her eyes, as she turned towards him in the doorway.

He was glad that, having been baffled in his earlier attempts to speak his mind, he had postponed the

appeal until it might be made in this hour of his domestic triumph. Here, in this atmosphere of revelry and music, in an environment which displayed all the gifts he had to offer at their richest, the full magnitude of her possession should be revealed to her. Happy woman! when all around her thronged virgins and widows who would have given their all for her chance.

Suddenly, at the psychological moment, just as the Babel of conversation on the terraces was increasing to a fever pitch and the haze of blue smoke was drifting into the brightly illuminated hall, came the sound of banjos and trap-drums in a burst of rag-time from the ball-room. The effect was electric. The guests came pouring back into the hall, singing in accompaniment to the familiar tune and facetiously practising preliminary steps. Lord Mellingham advanced and raised his voice above the clamour in a few words of benevolent encouragement.

"Come, my dear people," he cried. "Make the most of your time. Lead the way to the ball-room, I pray you. Commence your juzz."

CHAPTER VI

"I SHOULD like to ascertain how the preparations of Mr. and Mrs. Dipper have progressed," said Lord Mellingham to Mrs. Tavistock, "but I hesitate to go and inquire, because they are in their bedroom, and to disturb them might be considered in doubtful taste."

"They will have to be disturbed by some means or other," was the reply, "or they will think you don't require them to appear after all, and will retire into their bedroom beds, which would only mean further delay. If I may make the suggestion, I think this is one of the occasions when your inter-bedroom telephone system might be called into use."

"To be sure. What happy inspirations you enjoy, dear lady."

"Oh, thank you, Lord Mellingham; but I suppose you only have telephones in your spare bedrooms because there are times when your lady guests may be heard but not seen."

"True," said Lord Mellingham. "I will communicate with the Old Bedroom from my study."

He returned to Mrs. Tavistock's side a few minutes later, wearing a rather puzzled expression.

"I can only trust," he observed, "that the dancing of Mrs. Dipper is more remarkable than her mentality. I opened the conversation by asking her whether she had heard that her husband had arrived, and she replied with some agitation in the negative. On further inquiries, however, I elicited the information that she had seen her husband, who is still, it appears, engaged in his toilet. Finally she agreed to descend when they shall have completed their arrangements. Not that they are required to perform just yet, but their whole attitude seems strangely dilatory."

"Probably the husband's late arrival has rather upset them. Also, I suppose, the fact that he is trying to complete his toilet in your clothes may account for a certain amount of delay. I expect they will be ready by the time they are wanted."

"No doubt," agreed Lord Mellingham, knitting his brows. "At the same time"—and he squared his shoulders—"I shall not encourage any hanky-panky from persons of their calibre. If they do not put in an appearance shortly, I will institute further inquiries."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Henry Talboyes, as he entered the Old Bedroom. "You said 'Come in' you

know, and I thought you'd have finished putting your dress on."

"Well, so I have," said Pauline.

"Oh, have you? I'm sorry. Mistake anyone might make."

"It's a very pretty dress."

"I know it is, only isn't it a bit—concentric, so to speak?"

"What do you mean?" said Pauline. "This is the dress which makes it so important for me to get that fee. It's a beauty."

"I know it is," admitted Talboyes. "I haven't anything against the dress at all, but, if it comes to that, *you* haven't very much. I don't wish to be personal and I think it's a charming dress, only I didn't know that evening dresses were quite so—so middlemost."

"You didn't expect me to appear in an ordinary evening gown, did you?" said Pauline with some impatience.

"No," he replied. "Although I don't know you very well, I don't think I ever expected that."

Pauline gave a little pout of displeasure.

"My shoulders are generally admired," she continued.

"Yes, I can see that," said Talboyes.

"And you know, or ought to know, that in a good many of one's more spirited movements, the shoul-

ders come into play pretty freely. People like to watch that."

Talboyes stared at her.

"By Jove, you do think of things," he commented.

"And, regarding my legs——"

"Right," said Talboyes, complying.

"You don't expect me to dance in a train, do you?"

"To dance in a train?" cried Talboyes, amazed at such an inapposite suggestion.

Pauline resumed the offensive with the brisk curt-ness of speech and manner characteristic of her.

"Look here, don't stand and waste time with your footling remarks. We've got to look sharp. They've already been inquiring about us on the phone. And, if you're going to be personal about appearances, look at *you*."

"I know," admitted Talboyes, stroking the trousers which fell in folds over his legs. "I have been warned myself before now that I was getting rather corpulent, and I don't mind telling you that I have gone to a good deal of pains to reduce my weight. Only this evening I ran for several miles, and I have started a regular system of being Swedish to myself in my bath, or letting somebody else be Turkish to me in theirs."

"Yes; well, never mind that now——"

"But I *do* mind. Just when it's important that I should look my best. I could have worn these things

comfortably a few months ago. When I think what have endured, being beaten with hot towels and—”

“Shut up. Every moment we have together is precious.”

Talboyes looked up at her with a queer smile.

“What a strange woman you are. What do you want me to do now?”

“We’ve got to go down there before long,” said Pauline with a demonstrative gesture. “There we shall be expected to go through with the business as though we’d never had another partner all our lives. I don’t know how we’re going to do it, but we must try. Whatever happens, nobody must guess that you’re not really my husband. Don’t for an instant let your mind wander or forget that you are my husband. And, however good a performer you may be, we *must* get in a good practice even if it’s only to gain the impression of our familiarity with each other. Come on now. Catch hold of me and let me get an idea of your form.”

Talboyes with an air of resignation decided to do his best. He assumed a sheepish smile and, advancing a few steps towards her, extended his arms ceremoniously.

“Darling!” he exclaimed.

Pauline posed herself for his reception with a quick smile.

"Don't play the fool," she said. "Come on, catch hold and let's see what you can do."

"I don't see that this is really necessary," said Talboyes as he stepped towards her. "Still there may be something in what you say about environment."

He took her in his arms and kissed her delicately upon the lips. A sharp box on the left ear was his reward.

"Look here," she cried, "don't you imagine that I'm going to put up with that sort of thing. Do the thing properly without wasting time."

"Good God!" cried Talboyes, stepping back and rubbing his ear, "Do you expect me to bite you?"

"I'm not like that at all," remarked Pauline with demure asperity. "Can't you do what's required of you in the proper way?"

"Proper?" echoed Talboyes. "I like that. Let me tell you that this is verging on about as improper a proceeding as I've ever experienced. Not only that, you seem to me to be entirely unreasonable. You ask me to behave as though I were your husband, and yet I can't get as far as kissing you without being assaulted."

"All right, all right," said Pauline, snapping with impatience the fingers of her left hand which was still extended at the requisite angle for the dancing rehearsal. "If you'll only come on and go ahead

with this practice I'll overlook that little peccadillo. In fact, if you're very good and please me, I might even let you do it again at the end of the evening."

"I have no desire whatsoever to do it again," said Talboyes, still rubbing his ear. "And what on earth you desire me to try and do to you now I simply dare not think."

"Oh, cut that out; you do waste such a lot of time."

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"Why, dance up and down this room of course."

"Dance up and down the room?" cried Talboyes in the most incredulous tone. "No, hang it"—he pulled himself up and jerked his head in a manner which clearly betokened that he was not to be trifled with to that extent—"there are limits, you know. I suppose the next thing you will want me to do will be to scale up to the top of the wardrobe. No, you can't pull my leg quite as much as all that."

"Oh, don't trifle with me," said Pauline petulantly.

"I certainly shan't attempt to do so again," he replied.

"But we must rehearse," she repeated, stamping her little foot in vexation.

"So you keep on saying, but I haven't a glimmering of what you mean by that rather vague term. I'm quite ready to help you. I've said I would and I will. Only do be more explicit. I'm supposed to be

your husband, but you haven't given me the least information about yourself. Let's make a fresh start. Let's see exactly how we stand. *You've* been standing in a peculiar position for about two minutes. Has that anything to do with it?"

Pauline relaxed her peculiar position and gazed at him with an expression of searching misgiving.

"You know what Hank and I do?" she faltered.

Talboyes stroked his chin.

"I refuse to be led into any further speculations. I have already taken what I considered to be a comparatively elementary chance, and you replied by giving me a violent blow over the head."

"But, when you said you could take Hank's place, you meant that you were a tip-top dancer? Oh, please say you meant that."

The sudden apprehension had robbed Pauline of all her disdain. She stretched an appealing hand towards Talboyes in pathetic supplication. There was no need for him to reply. His countenance was sufficiently eloquent.

"Dancer! Good Lord, now I begin to see!"

Pauline heaved a deep sigh, turned slowly and flung herself on to a chair. Her feather fan fell to the floor, but she made no effort to recover it. Suddenly she broke the silence, gesticulating wildly with her hand towards the telephone.

"And I've just told them that we shall be down in no time to entertain them."

He was silent, and after a moment's pause she shot a keen glance at his face. It was lowered in examination of the borrowed pumps which were half a size too large for him. As he slowly raised his head she saw that he was bursting with uncontrollable laughter.

She looked him up and down in haughty displeasure, as she might have regarded some obstreperous youth of her town acquaintance who had overstepped the somewhat shadowy bounds of her prescribed decorum. But Pauline was a nimble-witted woman, and the twin imps of mischief and humour are always on the heels of wit, alert for a commission. The frown upon her face softened by slow degrees as she felt the infection of the hopeless humour which Henry Talboyes found in the situation. In his eyes were tears of laughter. He wiped them away apologetically with Lord Mellingham's second-best sleeve.

"Oh dear, I'm sorry," he said. "But I simply can't help laughing. I'm afraid we've been rather at cross-purposes. Look at these beastly clothes. The idea of appearing in them is comic enough, but as for dancing in them——"

"But don't you dance at all? I suppose you have *some* idea. Can you jazz?"

"Jazz? Ah, I've heard of that; in fact, I think

I've condemned it; but I don't think I've ever actually seen it done."

"But what the dickens are we to do?" cried Pauline. "It would be all right if they hadn't telephoned just now, but as it is I've said that I've seen my husband and we'll be ready to go down and jazz at them in about two twos."

Talboyes restrained his mirth and deliberated.

"Much depends on whether the old lord has a sense of humour."

Pauline waved her arms about in emphatic argument.

"A man who keeps telephones in his bedrooms!"

"That doesn't follow," said Talboyes. "A sense of humour is the keynote of immorality. At the same time I follow your argument. I have seen the front of the house and the hall and this room. I have seen his dressing-room and I have seen his dress clothes. The old lord has *not* got a sense of humour. Well, then——"

Pauline drummed with her fingers on the arm of the chair.

"You gave me to understand you'd heard of Hank. It never entered my head that you didn't know who he was. In fact, I believe you distinctly said that you *had* heard of him."

Talboyes defended his attitude with some vehemence.

"Show me the man who, when a lady says 'My husband is the famous Mr. So-and-so,' will have the courage to reply 'I've never heard of him.'"

"But I kept on talking about dancing. I said I had a new kind of hesitation. There's only one kind of hesitation."

"I thought you meant *my* kind," replied Talboyes, with a droll modesty which disarmed criticism.

Pauline could only throw up her head with a curt laugh. Then, woman-like, she returned to her remonstrance.

"And did you suppose they made it worth our while to come down to a place like this and do nothing gracefully for a handsome fee?"

"Yes, I did. I imagined that the old lord—well, simply hired you, to put it bluntly, to come and be one of his party. I know I should try and do the same if I were an old lord, though I don't suppose I should make quite such a point of Hank, and the party would possibly be very much more exclusive."

Pauline's eyes brightened perceptibly, but she raised a playfully protesting finger.

"I never go anywhere without my husband," she said.

"That is what I should describe as the official statement of the matter," replied Talboyes. "And, as long as the old lord and his friends believe it, well and good. But, when the husband with whom you

have gone anywhere on this occasion begins to jazz, several things may happen. The old lord has no sense of humour, remember. We shall probably finish up together in the local gaol. You will lose the fee you set so much store upon and your dressmaker will sue you—or part of you—for wearing that dress without being in a position to pay for it. Meanwhile Hank will arrive and sue you for divorce with myself as co-respondent, which will incidentally be most frightfully inconvenient for me, as I have reasons for desiring to be a particularly upright character just now—not, of course, that I have ever been anything else.”

“I can manage Hank,” Pauline assured him.

“You haven’t managed him very well to-night.”

“You don’t feel capable of putting up a good enough show to take these people in?”

Talboyes briefly described his dancing capabilities with more intensity than conceit. Gradually the cloud had gathered again on Pauline’s brow. She found herself in a very delicate situation, one which demanded all her acuteness. She looked at the stout, middle-aged gentleman of military appearance with the neat moustache, as he stood before her in the ridiculous degradation of his voluminous, borrowed clothes with the patient suffrance of some stately domestic animal, whom children have been mischievously decorating. A throb of derisive laughter, the

echo of her former mirth, shook her as she beheld him. But already her mind was occupied with one prevailing motive.

At all costs she must save her face, she must try to persuade this unfortunate victim, in lieu of a better to be dragged below and to perform with the aid of Providence such gyrations as might possibly gull a country house-party into vain admiration. It was not really the fee which lured her to this desperate course. It was the certain knowledge that the violation of an important engagement at this period of her career would mean a blow to the reputation of Hank and Pauline Dipper from which they could not hope to recover. Every agent in the country would give them the cold shoulder. As it was, they found recognition difficult enough to obtain, and it was only by means of a studied extravagance that they sometimes were enabled to catch the eye of the gentleman with the cigars who presided over the fortunes of public entertainers. Hank, by some inexplicable mischance, had failed her at the unforgiving minute, and she felt that all her faculties must be exercised, if she were to save him and herself from disaster.

As Talboyes in his philosophic humour predicted, Hank might arrive just at the most inconvenient moment, but this was a contingency which she viewed without great apprehension. He might be in time to

perform or, at any rate, to appear towards the end of the entertainment, in which case Pauline felt that she could make her revelation in a manner warranted to conciliate any old lord, and possibly enrapture the guests, provided only that she had kept them thoroughly delighted with herself and her temporary Hank up to that time. She looked again towards the heavy, immobile man with the ridiculous trousers. Could he, would he do it? There was no time to lose. She must play her strongest card without further delay.

Pauline settled herself on her chair, turned her bewitching face upwards with an expression of appealing distress at a large water-colour of a group of ladies, *au naturel*, in a procession with a lion and a copious supply of pink roses, and strained herself in an effort to compel tears to her eyes. It was not long before Talboyes noticed. "Hallo!" he cried. "I say what's up now? You were laughing a moment ago. Don't say you've got hysterics. Where's that champagne?"

"No, it's only the disappointment. It's much worse than it ever was now. I'm not angry with you, don't think that."

"I should jolly well hope you weren't. I shouldn't think of offering to try and do a service for a lady who is angry with a man because he doesn't jazz."

"But can you be of service to me if you won't try and jazz?"

"Who says I won't try and jazz?"

"You will?" she cried, pausing in her effort to weep.

"I promised to help you as you saw fit. I dare say I shall make a howling mess of it, but that's your look out. I would do what you called upon me to attempt if Hank was a trainer of wild beasts."

"This is topping of you," said Pauline, rising.

"Not at all," he replied. "It's entirely up to you. I don't possess the first glimmering of how to jazz, and we are both engaging in a criminal deception. If I were Nijinsky it might be easier to square one's conscience, but as it is I shall let you down."

"I may be able to pull you through," said Pauline, standing before him, "if you'll hold me tight and let me guide you."

Talboyes smiled upon her critically.

"Oh, if it's merely a question of holding you tight, I *am* Nijinsky."

"Come, let's try and see how we get on."

Talboyes hesitated.

"Seriously," he said, "you don't intend to persevere with this outrage?"

"What else can I do unless Hank turns up—and he is evidently not going to? I can coach you a little here, and then I can tell you a few things about danc-

ing in general, which you must remember carefully, in case people come and ask you questions."

"All right," said Talboyes with a sigh of resignation. "Heaven knows what the end of it may be, but do what you like with me."

"Start with a simple step," said Pauline, engaging him with practical dexterity. "Right hand here, please. That's it. Now forward. Sway."

"Sway?"

"Yes, sway, sway."

"Sway, sway," repeated Talboyes, as he suffered himself to be trotted for several paces across the extensive carpet.

"You are doing your best, aren't you?" asked Pauline, glancing up at him.

"Absolutely. I told you I didn't——"

"All right, try again. Sway. Don't over-sway."

"This swaying business," Talboyes ejaculated with difficulty in the midst of his struggles, "is a bit steep for a simple step, isn't it?"

"Don't talk. I'll do any talking that's necessary. Now, swing me round."

"Swing? Really I don't——"

"Swing—a simple swing. Are you trying?"

"Very, I'm afraid. I mean——"

"Now back again. Lumber more."

"Lumber? Yes, but you see——"

"Lumber. Don't talk all the time. Lumber from the hip."

"Hip?"

Pauline halted, released herself from his grasp, and surveyed him as a schoolmistress might survey an incorrigible boy.

"You're awfull!" was her terse verdict.

"Quite hopeless, I should think," said Talboyes in a relieved tone.

After a brief pause Pauline straightened herself for another effort.

"Now try gripping me quickly with the left hand under the knees."

"Great Scot!" said Talboyes. "Is that done in the jazz?"

"None of this is really jazz. If it comes to that there is really no dance called jazz at all. Jazz is simply the name given to the music which accompanies the dance."

"Then it's even worse than I thought."

"The dance itself was originally 'The Shimmy Shake.'"

"Indeed?" said Talboyes. "Of course I only learnt the old and comparatively stately dances, such as the '*Can-can*.'"

Pauline, adjusting the silver bandeau in her hair, hastily continued the primary course of professional instruction.

"The movements which I am trying to show you are peculiar——"

"I can well believe that," he interrupted, watching with some admiration the deft activity of the fingers at work upon the raven hair.

"Peculiar to professional dancing. They are the ordinary, everyday stunts which will be expected of you. So it doesn't really seem much good our trying to go on, does it?"

"No, I'm afraid it doesn't. Still, we may as well just try this business of gripping you under your knees. I think I might be rather good at that."

"Well, you may try if you like, only be careful not to let me fall."

"Oh, I won't do that," Talboyes assured her, as he stooped obligingly. "I don't mean to let you down if I can help it. How's that now?"

He passed his wrist below the tendons of her knees and took a firm grip with his left hand.

"Ow, don't pinch," cried Pauline. "Can't you be a little more easy about it? What's your other hand doing—your right? Take it off my elbow."

"It only shows that my right hand doesn't know what my left hand is doing," remarked Talboyes, "or it certainly wouldn't be content with an elbow."

"Oh, please let me go. I've never seen such a clumsy, unscientific exhibition in all my life."

"Well, dash it, this is only my first attempt. You don't think that I have made a habit of gripping ladies under their knees?"

"Well, put your other hand on my waist and lift me."

"There you are," said Talboyes, carrying out this manoeuvre without difficulty.

"That's right. Now keep me there. You've got to try spinning while holding me up."

"Spinning! Good heavens!"

"I'm not heavy. Go on."

"Yes, but I'm a rotten poor spinner at the best of times."

"Try."

"Which way?"

"There's only one way to spin. Round and round."

"Ah no, you're wrong," argued Talboyes, swaying her recumbent figure in semi-circles on either hand, "there's clockwise and anti-clockwise."

"Either. Only do please be careful. You're pinching me frightfully."

Talboyes drew a deep breath as though about to plunge his head into water for a considerable time. He then, with a great effort, commenced to shuffle on one flat foot after the other in a vaguely circular movement. He groaned as he did so, but the groan must have been reflective of his loss of dignity rather

than a comment on Pauline's weight, which was almost negligible.

Suddenly Talboyes paused; so suddenly indeed that Pauline thought that she had slipped from his grasp and clung more tightly, with a little gasp of fright.

She had heard nothing. Talboyes apparently had been arrested by a warning sound from without. He renewed his hold of his delicate burden, and faced the door with the startled misgiving of a nervous burglar. Pauline, who was on the point of commanding him to release her as carefully as possible, noted the quick apprehension of his manner and was silent. Amid the maelstrom, mental and material, occasioned by his laborious execution of Hank's stunt, Henry Talboyes thought he heard some one knocking at the door.

Some one had knocked at the door. But the knock was not repeated. The knocker considered that the inmates of the room had received sufficient warning.

"Put me down, Hank," said Pauline, with commendable adaptability. "And please be careful."

"Yes, I shall have to be," gasped Talboyes. He made, however, no immediate effort to comply with her request, but stood facing the intruder with a feeble smile of guilty astonishment.

Mrs. Tavistock closed the door behind her and

advanced with an engaging little inclination of the head.

“Good evening—Hank,” she said pleasantly.

CHAPTER VII

A GENTLEMAN raised himself deliberately from the seat of a partially wrecked car, which rested in the ditch at a steep bend of a remote country road. Immediately above his head was a hedge, and over the hedge peered the heavily lined, highly-coloured countenance of a farm labourer. For a moment or two the occupant of the car blinked at this countenance with a rather dazed expression. Then he turned and indicated a large, conglomerate mass which lay prone in the road beside the car.

"Say," began the car-driver, "was that your cow?"

"Was?" replied the other, repeating the word with tremulous emphasis, "What d'yer mean—was? Yer ain't gone and killed the cow, 'ave yer?"

Mr. Hank P. Dipper pulled the large check cap off his forehead with an air of perplexity, and leant forward to obtain a clearer view of his victim.

"She don't handsome any," was his verdict.

"What d'yer mean by that, eh?"

Mr. Dipper did not wait to explain. He scram-

bled with some difficulty out of the small car, vaulting the unnaturally slanting side, and stooping over the recumbent cow made closer examination.

"She's all right," he reported in more cheerful tones. "She ain't beef. She's vibratin'."

"That'll be them nerves," commented the pessimist in the hedge. "All beasts does a bit o' twitching for a while after."

"She ain't out," insisted Dipper. "Her eyes are open."

"That don't signify," said the labourer. "Even mortal eyes keeps open after 'aving breathed their last, and, as frequently as not, has to be closed for decency with a brace o' coppers."

"She's licking her chops," said Dipper, "which ain't a post-mortem habit in anybody, unless it was possibly that historical guy who went out in a hog's head of wine. No, sir. This cow is not out. She just got a good bat on the head, which may make her act foolish for a while; but I guess that don't matter any in a cow."

"Yer'd better wait," was the guarded reply. "Yer may have broke something."

"Wait? Broke something?" repeated Dipper with gentle, American sarcasm. "Say, you want to be in some observatory." He indicated the car with his thumb. "Have you noticed my automobile?"

"Sarve yer out, if yer can't manage more careful

than to come into contract with that there cow. Sarve yer out I say."

Dipper struck the attitude of an orator with one hand upon his hip and the other free for purposes of demonstration. He then proceeded to contest the argument from the hedge.

"Say," was his inevitable beginning. "Say, if your pasture land is in such bum shape that this unfortunate creature gets scouting around on a tar-track for eatable food, I guess she's mighty sorry I haven't put her right out. If she got straying through jest ordinary inquisitiveness, then it was up to you to round her up."

"Yer ain't English, are yer?" was the rather unexpected reply.

"No, I'm Hindoo," said Dipper. "Though that don't help any."

"Cows has as much right to the road as what you have."

"Well, she's gotten it."

This closed the discussion for several moments. The gentleman in the hedge seemed dissatisfied with his progress in the matter, for he removed an aged straw hat with a gigantic brim and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. His chief controversial gift lay in his ability to lead the conversation into new and surprising lines, but here, it seemed, he had met his match. He continued to ruminate silently upon

likely lines of argument, while Dipper turned his attention to the car.

The next definite move in the game was made by the cow, who suddenly regained consciousness, scrambled to her feet and retired hastily from the scene of action through a gap in the hedge, lowing in a puzzled manner and tossing her head from side to side, as though trying to rid it of its strange discomfiture.

On witnessing this unexpected resurrection, the gentleman in the hedge altered his tactics. He informed Mr. Dipper that the cow was not in reality his property, but Farmer Mull's. He further pointed out that the car might now be lifted back on to the road and driven thence before Farmer Mull discovered that his cow had been damaged. If the original witness of the incident could only be prevailed on to keep his mouth shut, nobody would be any the wiser. He made a rough valuation of how much this programme might be worth to Dipper, and incidentally to himself.

Dipper's reply was not readily understood, but was adjudged to be discouraging. The witness thereupon stated his intention of going and summoning Mull. He found Dipper strangely unmoved by this threat, the latter saying that if any question of compensation arose, he and not this Reub, Mull, or whatever the ranch-owner's name was, had the first

claim, and that, so far as that part of the Hedge-Reub's suggested bargain was concerned, he, Dipper, was unprepared to come across. He would, however, accept help in getting the automobile back on to the roadway. After a few minutes' deliberation the man with the straw hat descended from his hedge.

The car was soon restored from its position in the ditch. The lamps had been smashed and a wing dislocated. The front axle and steering had also suffered, though to how great an extent Mr. Dipper boldly resolved to determine by experiment. The summer evening was long, and he would not have recourse to borrowing lamps if the steering proved satisfactory. He restarted the engine and climbed into the driver's seat. The man from the hedge stood inexorably in his path. Dipper tried him with a shilling, and the other accepted this in payment for practical services rendered, but made further references to hush-money. Dipper thereupon pulled from his waistcoat pocket an ultimatum in the form of a visiting-card, which he bade the Hedge-Reub present to the Ranch-Reub, with the intimation that, should the latter desire to contest the case, he would be mightily happy to meet him in the courts. Then with a threatening, zigzag motion, the little car departed on its way.

There are some men who court adversity in order to gratify what they freely advertise as their ability

to "win through." Mr. Dipper was one of their number. He drove a car which he knew to be unreliable if not unsafe. He was haunted by a suspicion that he had long since mistaken his route. But he drove on, with a satisfied smile upon his lips, glorying in being "up against it." When the ponderous and systematic British tortoise would have paused to inquire his way, this Trans-Atlantic hare bolted blindly ahead with all the optimism which his superior dash was considered to warrant. It was only when he had paused for refreshment at a village inn, many miles from the scene of his former halt, that, provoked by an ever-increasing doubt as to his whereabouts, he sounded the buxom country barmaid on this point.

Pauline was aware of the over-confident nature of her husband. She knew that he could not be trusted to remember the name and address of their noble patron of this evening. She had therefore taken the trouble to write these details carefully on the back of the visiting card which Hank Dipper had presented to his confederate of the hedgerow.

Hank's complacency was somewhat disturbed by this discovery. Over his first glass he informed himself, with a modesty which he seldom displayed, that anywhere outside of a dance-hall he was a pinhead. He also regretted the minor instructional engagement which had prevented him from accompanying the more reliable Pauline down by train. While con-

suming his second glass he began to summon fresh energy. He was already overdue. He made necessarily vague inquiries concerning the local country seats. These only resulted in a decision to postpone further investigations until he was in Dorsetshire instead of Wiltshire; and, urging his protesting two-seater forward with the recklessness of growing despair, he unconsciously crossed the borderline of the two counties at the actual moment when Mrs. Tavistock crossed the threshold of the Old Bedroom.

How Mrs. Tavistock came to enter that room may be briefly explained. She had ascended the staircase not as an envoy but as a refugee. To a woman of far less sagacity it would have been obvious that Lord Mellingham was pluming himself for the impending declaration of his passion. Had it not been for his fussy discomfiture over the apparent deficiencies of the Dippers, that declaration would probably have already materialized. Awaiting it firmly but by no means eagerly, Mrs. Tavistock had reviewed her position with a feeling of dawning remorse. She had not, it is true, incited the love-sick peer; indeed, only his stubborn vainglory could have survived the graceful discouragements which she had administered. But she realized that, in her efforts to gain for Helen some measure of the recognition due from the comfortable uncle, she had allowed herself to be drawn into a highly ornamental, gilt cage,

from which she could not escape without the loss of two or three feathers of self-respect.

If the snobbery of Mellingham Hall and its inmates surpassed even her shrewd anticipations; if its owner proved even more blindly, ridiculously enamoured than she had foreseen—yet she had to acknowledge to herself that she had apparently accepted Lord Mellingham's invitation while fully aware of the intentions which had prompted it. True, she had been sincere and single-minded in her main desire to advance Helen and, through Helen, the poor, proud, despised little family at Croydon, but even here she had failed. She could find no evidence to support Mrs. Monk's hopeful theory that Lord Mellingham would do something for Helen. He regarded Helen with rather unnecessary contempt. This was Helen's one and only chance of doing something for herself, and Peter Dollery had proved politely unresponsive. Mrs. Tavistock found it difficult to blame Peter. As she sat and meditated alone, she watched Helen, who was, at this moment, asking a red-faced, country youth, with a shirtfront which insisted on protruding from his waistcoat, whether he was a disciple of Dostoieffsky. Mrs. Tavistock suddenly decided that they would depart next morning. She would ward off Lord Mellingham's advances for the few intervening hours; and thus she could evade the charge, which she secretly felt to be justified, that she had

come, in malice aforethought, to flout the noble parvenu in the midst of his purchased magnificence, and to snap the fingers of superior taste and breeding in a countenance swollen with ill-gotten luxury. For Mrs. Tavistock knew that the superiority of taste and breeding, which so frequently vents itself in this manner against the arrogance of possession, proves itself to be but the poor relation of that arrogance, born of the same stock and nurtured by the same principles. She herself was fortunately not a snob. The dismay with which she shrank from the sumptuous expensiveness of the Hall was perfectly genuine, and for this very reason she did not wish to seem to have gone out of her way to display her scorn. If she allowed the fat peer to propose to her and promptly rejected him, she could find no honest defence for her action in coming to this place at all. Already the members of the house-party were awaiting hourly the announcement of her engagement. If the offer was made and refused, the worthy gentleman who had duly inspected and turned down every eligible maiden in the neighbourhood would not easily be permitted to forget that he had received a wholesome snub so deliberately. The charitable nature of Mrs. Tavistock preferred that Mrs. Duckingham-Leape should favour the view that Lord Mellingham, having bidden a London widow to the Hall on a trial trip, had thought better of it,

and very wisely too, the widow being of decidedly bourgeois appearance and address. By what feasible method could she avoid the imminent fiasco of an almost public proposal?

At that moment Lord Mellingham was still attending to some trivial detail in connection with the expected appearance of the Dippers. It was unlikely that he would broach his declaration until his nervous misgivings about his important feature of his entertainment had been set at rest. Nevertheless Mrs. Tavistock decided that she would take no risk. She seized the favourable opportunity to slip away upstairs. When the Dippers had duly descended and performed to their fastidious patron's satisfaction, she might, in the last resort, plead a headache and retire early. She was wondering whether Lord Mellingham would, in this case, ring her up in her bedroom and claim her hand by telephone; when her thoughts were distracted by the appearance of Minnie at the head of the stairs.

"What are you looking so excited about, Minnie?"

"Oh, madam. It's very queer. The dancing gentleman arrived late and dressed himself in his lordship's room."

"I know. So does his lordship. It's all quite right."

"Oh, but, madam, it is not, begging your pardon. The dancing gentleman has now gone along the pas-

sage to the Old Bedroom where the dancing lady is, and I happen to know that he is not the dancing lady's husband at all."

"Indeed, I think you should be careful what you say, Minnie. I cannot imagine how you can possess any knowledge on the subject, and, in any case it is hardly our place to interfere in matters of that sort. These rather artistic people are often a little bit careless about their relationships, and——"

"Oh, but, madam, excuse me speaking, but the dancing gentleman who came and dressed up in his lordship's clothes in his lordship's room, and is now with the dancing lady in the Old Bedroom, is not really a dancing gentleman at all."

"Yes, yes, Minnie. He is Mr. Dipper, an American gentleman, and I have every reason to believe that the lady is his wife. In any case they seem quite happy about it, and I don't think we need worry ourselves."

"Oh, but, madam, I beg your pardon, but I do assure you—I saw the gentleman once or twice quite close and oh, I do assure you, madam, I know him. He is a gentleman who comes to visit Miss Starchfield frequent, and I have seen him there."

"Really I think you must be mistaken, Minnie, but if it comes to that I fail to see why he should not visit Miss Starchfield and be a dancing gentleman at the same time."

"Oh, madam, do you know Miss Starchfield?"

"No, but——"

"Oh, madam——" And Minnie shook her head vigorously. Evidently the improbability of Miss Starchfield of Coombe Puddy conducting a series of secret assignations with an American dancing gentleman was beyond verbal expression.

Mrs. Tavistock suddenly displayed greater interest.

"Miss Starchfield? Oh, you were in Miss Starchfield's service, Minnie?"

"In and out, madam," replied Minnie.

"Who was the gentleman you speak of?"

"You mean the gentleman in the Old Bedroom with the dancing lady?"

"No—well, I cannot believe you are right about that Minnie."

"Oh, madam I am right, I assure you. I know the gentleman too well to mistake him—not only in his looks but in his little ways besides. This gentleman is the same one. I have heard tell in books and that of a fatal likeness, but, even if there was another gentleman who was so like him in the face that you couldn't tell the difference, I should know him by his little ways."

"Why what did he do?" asked Mrs. Tavistock with slightly increased intensity.

"He comes out from seeing the dancing lady in

the Old Bedroom and goes for to dress himself in his lordship's. But instead of going straight to his lordship's room he goes half-way downstairs, as though forgetful of what he was thinking about. Then he remembers himself and walks back, looking terrible upset. Besides which, I heard his voice, which I also know quite familiar, for he spoke to himself when he stopped and turned back. 'Oh God!' he says."

Mrs. Tavistock listened with grave attention. Minnie's word-portrait certainly resembled that friend of Miss Starchfield's whom she had in mind.

"Mr. Talboyes?" she asked briefly.

"Oh, madam, the very same. You know about it then?" cried Minnie, with a frown of perplexity over this complication.

Mrs. Tavistock made no reply. She sat on the edge of her dressing-table, and directed a long glance of conjecture towards the passage from which she had just entered the room. Her reflections did not appear to be altogether void of amusement. Then she turned again to Minnie with a little shrug.

"Madam," said the latter, feeling that this action implied a challenge, "I beg your pardon, but I can only tell you what I have seen with my own eyes and can swear if called upon to do so. And what I say is—with all respect and not wishful in any way to concern myself in matters which do not concern

me, but which I am so surprised at that I cannot but help make mention of to you—the gentleman who come and dressed in the way I have told you and is at this moment in that Old Bedroom with that dancing lady is Mr. Talboyes, the gentleman who, and I ought to know, seeing that three times altogether while in her service it so happened, come down to visit Miss Starchfield o' Coombe Puddy."

This announcement was robbed of the dramatic force intended by its author, owing to Minnie's inherent deficiency in breathing power. Its conclusion found her out of action for some minutes. Mrs. Tavistock rose from her uncomfortable seat and moved across to the doorway, where she again paused in incredulous deliberation. Could the girl be right? The situation seemed to possess the properties of a dream. Yet this was just such a strait as poor dear Henry might unwittingly have steered into. Had he, while on a visit to Coombe Puddy, by some means learnt that she, his truest friend and acknowledged confessor, was near at hand, and have come blundering out to see her, only to find himself entrapped in the meshes of some misunderstanding which he lacked the lucidity to disentangle? Had he been mistaken for the missing dancer and admitted as Hank Dipper? This could have been effected only with his own knowledge and consent, or why should he agree to don Lord Mellingham's dress suit and

attempt to ingratiate himself with the doubtless astonished Mrs. Dipper? Surely he need only have rung the bell and have asked in a rational manner to be allowed to speak to Mrs. Tavistock. Why should he resort to such strange measures, which, she knew, must be particularly irksome to him?

Then a more reasonable explanation dawned upon her. He had come, in ignorance of her presence in the house, with news of the missing Dipper. Ah, that was more likely. After all, she had not told him that she was going to stay at Mellingham. She might have made some casual reference to her efforts to propitiate the wealthy uncle whom they had discovered for Helen, but that was all. At Coombe Puddy Henry had learnt bad news of Dipper, and in his usual charming way, had consented to come and break it to the forsaken lady languishing in the Old Bedroom of the Hall. But why in the name of fortune should he have announced himself as Dipper? As a means of breaking it gently perhaps. He must have succeeded in breaking it very gently if the stricken wife had expressed a desire that he should put on a dress suit and rejoin her in the bedroom. Perhaps after all Minnie had been the victim of some grotesque illusion, and yet Mrs. Tavistock knew and understood Henry Talboyes, and—somehow this savoured of Henry.

Mrs. Tavistock slipped quietly down the passage

into Lord Mellingham's dressing-room. With characteristic lack of foresight Talboyes had left his discarded garments in a state of disorder which only the clothes shed by a man in a hurry can assume. Mrs. Tavistock picked a coloured linen shirt off the floor and quickly examined the regions inside the collar. Then she folded all the clothes together and bore them back to her bedroom. By skilful management she included the boots in the load. Not for the first time the guardian angel of Henry Talboyes had her hands full.

Her brows were knitted in perplexity, but a little smile played upon her lips—a smile which betokened nothing but a desire to aid, as so often before she had aided, the mismanaging, entangled friend, whom circumstances had thrust so inexplicably into the unplumbed mysteries of the Old Bedroom.

Ladies, as you lift your eyes from the page, and glance across the fireplace at the well-trained companion of your hearth, orderly in habit and punctilious in routine, can you believe it possible that the love of woman should extend to a person of so egregious a nature that irregularity became almost a virtue in him, even when it was likely to be attended by some dire and intricate complications? Ah, you know it is so. You know that you are yourselves prepared to prove it so. You even regret perhaps in your hearts that the paragon in the op-

posite chair so seldom provides you with an opportunity for wearing the romantic vestments of the ministering angel. But here was the other extreme—a man whose light heart was the toy of every current of fortuitous circumstance. He would not be sitting in that chair at the other end of the hearthrug. He would have missed his train, or have been decoyed on his way home into some vague mission of benevolence, possibly, indeed probably, connected with a lady in distress.

Such a man may be lovable, but it is usually more convenient to love him in the abstract. Yet close at hand, as he engaged in his preposterous intrigue on behalf of Pauline Dipper, was a woman who loved him with all her heart—loved him to the extent of having made a definite promise to soothe his troubled spirit into a restful enjoyment of that comfort which only her watchful care could give. And if Mrs. Tavistock was fully aware that this little emergency, whatever it entailed besides the strange formality of dressing up in somebody else's dress clothes, might well have overtaken Henry after, instead of before, his marriage, yet the doubt in her eyes was only the doubt as to how he had got into this scrape, the smile on her lips was a smile of gratification at her ability to partake and assist.

“Minnie!”

[There was no need to call. Minnie was at the

doorway of Mrs. Tavistock's room. She gazed at the accumulation of garments in that lady's hands with an expression of deep mistrust. Mrs. Tavistock passed her and entered the room, laid the coat, the trousers and the shirt of Henry Talboyes fondly on the bed.

"Minnie," she repeated. The servant stood before her. The look which was directed towards her robbed the simple country girl of any thought of antagonism. It was the look of a trusting conspirator. "I see it is no use trying to deceive you, Minnie. But I wonder whether I can trust you to keep a secret."

Minnie assented, deeply interested.

"It is not for my sake—except indirectly," continued Mrs. Tavistock. "It is Mr. Talboyes' secret and I keep it because I am a friend of his. You must keep it, Minnie, because you are a friend of mine."

"What is it?" asked the practical Minnie, who had a vision of being admitted into the machinations of a gang of crooks.

"I want you to tell nobody that Mr. Talboyes is really Mr. Dipper."

"But is he? Oh, madam, is he?"

"Well, you have seen for yourself. But nobody knows that Mr. Talboyes dances for a profession. It is not a thing that a man in his position can be

expected to be proud of. If some of his clients knew about it they would not be so anxious to acknowledge him as their solicitor. Miss Starchfield, for instance—if Miss Starchfield could see him now——”

“In that Old Bedroom with the dancing lady? No, indeed. Oh, madam, is she his wife?”

“No, Minnie,” said Mrs. Tavistock, “she is not. These professional people often appear together as man and wife when they are not so. It is easier for them to get engagements or something, I believe. But that lady is not Mr. Talboyes’ wife. That is why I have brought his clothes along to this room. He may have to sleep here.”

“Oh, madam, is he your wife—I mean you his?”

“No, no, Minnie. I shall sleep elsewhere, of course.”

“Oh, where?”

“I don’t know yet,” said Mrs. Tavistock gravely. “Now mind you don’t say a word about all this to anyone. Perhaps Mr. Talboyes won’t sleep anywhere. I shall have to wait and see what is going to happen. I am not quite sure what Mr. Talboyes’ intentions are.”

“I wonder whether he is,” she added to herself.

CHAPTER VIII

“**O**NE makes such rash promises when women weep.”

Mrs. Tavistock did not reply. In the Old Bedroom she had listened to an epitome of the circumstances under which Henry Talboyes had found a welcome at the Hall. She had made little comment. She understood Henry. Of his subsequent pledge to Mrs. Dipper the above was the first word of explanation he had attempted; and this was uttered *sotto voce*, as the three were descending the staircase for the fulfilment of that awful rite to which he stood committed.

That situation in the Old Bedroom would have seemed to contain the elements for one of those familiar and delectable “big scenes” of the contemporary stage, wherein the weaker vessel is unexpectedly shadowed by the stronger and caught in the third act. Here was the man to stammer vain expostulation and empty excuse; the mistress to shrink guiltily from his embrace and retire to her stronghold of the divan, with the light of defiance in her

dark eyes; the consort, straight-backed, authoritative and serenely sarcastic. Perhaps the fact that Henry Talboyes was implicated rendered the scene suggestive of French farce rather than of British drama. But the sequence is usually analogous and only a matter of treatment. In farce the outraged lady sends for the *maître d'hôtel*, who waves his arms and smashes a lamp-shade; in the drama she sends for her solicitor.

In this case, however, the dramatic possibilities were sadly neglected. Long before the mutual explanations had been completed the dark watcher on the divan realized, with some astonishment, that the smile on the mysterious intruder's face was a smile not of sarcasm but of succour; and before three minutes had passed Pauline arose not to confront an interloper but to greet an ally. Nor had Talboyes for a moment assumed the rôle of the plausible dupe. He seemed to take it for granted that Mrs. Tavistock would endorse his policy and approve his motives. Her presence, indeed, seemed to act as a sedative to his nerves, for he recounted his experiences with a precision and accuracy which he seldom displayed.

If he thought, however, that the lady's welcome appearance heralded his release from further responsibility he was mistaken. Mrs. Tavistock requested a further rehearsal, and Henry accordingly

repeated his swaying, his lumbering, his swinging and his knee-gripping, all of which he accompanied with a running commentary of appeal to the amused supervisor. The latter then quickly formulated a preliminary plan of action, which she communicated to Pauline, who favoured it, and to Henry, who did not. He reviewed its shortcomings at great length and with growing apprehension. The telephone bell alone recalled him to a rather involved sense of duty. They proceeded downstairs, watched with breathless interest by the fourth conspirator from a surreptitious point of vantage.

A dance was in progress as they descended, and the inner hall was almost deserted. Lord Mellingham was standing at the foot of the staircase, frowning impatiently upwards; while Mr. Harris was engaged in sampling the contents of a cake-stand a short distance away. His lordship's face assumed a pleasanter expression as Mrs. Tavistock and her followers hove in sight.

"Here are Mr. and Mrs. Dipper," she said.

"My dear lady—how can I—a positive hostess!" murmured the peer.

Mr. Harris hastily consumed two outstanding samples and came forward, rather obviously attracted by Mrs. Dipper's gown.

Lord Mellingham inclined his head slightly at the melancholy figure of the male dancer.

"I was beginning to fear that you had failed us, Mr. Dipper."

Talboyes fidgeted nervously.

"Yes, I—I—I missed your train, my lordship—your lord—my train, your lord," he stammered.

"I am grieved to hear that you lost your belongings," continued Lord Mellingham.

"Yes," interposed Pauline, who observed that Talboyes was looking exactly like a schoolboy in the presence of the headmaster, and decided to do most of the talking. "It was really that which made us so late in coming down."

"Ah, b'h'rmm. Well, you found all you required in my wardrobe, I trust?" said his lordship with some condescension.

"Oh, more, much more," answered Talboyes politely. "And it was awfully course of your lordship of kind—kind of course. I only wish they were a bit smaller."

"They *are* a bit big," commented Mr. Harris.

"I must say I think you were fortunate in being provided so readily with them," said Lord Mellingham disdainfully.

"Oh, we're very grateful to you," put in Pauline. "And, as a matter of fact, my husband's appearance in them has given us rather a happy idea. As they make him look so grotesque——"

"Grotesque! Those clothes were cut by London's premier tailor."

"I'm not running the clothes down," rejoined Pauline. "Anyone who knows anything about clothes can see that they are a perfectly good, slap-up, fashionable outfit. But he's half a size too small for them and looks rather an ass, doesn't he?"

"I am not prepared to state how far I consider the clothes are to blame for that," replied Lord Mellingham, with a severe glance at Talboyes.

"Well, it all suits our purpose," said Pauline cheerfully, "because we are going to give you the first performance of a new dance just invented by my husband. It's supposed to be a semi-barbaric affair, and so, for that dance at any rate, his appearance will be well in keeping."

"Indeed?" said his lordship without enthusiasm.

"Isn't it splendid?" interposed the calm voice of Mrs. Tavistock. "I have just been hearing about it. It is supposed to represent a certain kind of dance performed by the primitive Esquimaux. Just think. It may make a hit in London, and we shall have been the first people to have seen it—at your house-party, Lord Mellingham."

"True, true, dear lady," said the mollified peer, smiling upon Mrs. Tavistock in a manner which made Henry Talboyes clench his fist beneath the over-lapping sleeve.

"May I also suggest that this hall is used as Mr. and Mrs. Dipper's green-room for the time being?" continued Mrs. Tavistock. "They can make their final arrangements here, if you will see that people don't come and interrupt them."

"But, dear me, I thought their final arrangements *were* made."

"They are," said Pauline. "But we should like to have somewhere to wait until you are ready for us. And, as a matter of fact, I could do with another turn or two at this Esquimaux' Lumber. My husband has got the knack of it wonderfully, but it's rather out of my line, and we want to do ourselves justice."

Lord Mellingham sighed deeply and sought Mrs. Tavistock's eye for guidance.

"I don't see that there's any desperate hurry for them," said the latter. "Everybody seems to be enjoying themselves enormously and the night is yet young." She glanced at the hall clock as she spoke and decided not to press this point.

"That's right, there's no panic. Don't overexcite yourself, my boy," said Mr. Harris, for reasons of his own.

"But, my dear lady, can I very well request my guests not to pass to and fro the ballroom via my Armorial Hall?" asked the perplexed host.

"Well then, may they use your study? They must

have somewhere to wait. I'll stay and see that they have all they want. Then I can send you word when everything is prepared, and you can have the floor cleared for their dance."

"That's the ticket. I'll stay and lend a 'and too," said Mr. Harris, watching Mrs. Dipper critically with half-closed eyes.

Lord Mellingham hesitated and, turning to Mrs. Tavistock, engaged that lady in a confidential argument, of which the words "sacrifice yourself" and "mountebanks" were alone audible.

"Oh, but I like to," she replied aloud. "I don't want to dance the whole evening. Besides, I do so want this part of your entertainment to be a success."

She had led him to the far end of the hall; and here she left him rather summarily and returned towards her protégés. Lord Mellingham, with an air of impatient disappointment, brushed aside the curtain which had been hung across the doorway of the ballroom and again lent his presiding presence to that scene of revelry.

It was to Mr. Harris that Mrs. Tavistock next imparted a brief whisper.

"Please do anything you can to soothe Mrs. Dipper's nerves. She is awfully upset about her husband being so late and unprepared. Perhaps a few minutes in the fresh air——"

"Righto, Mrs. Tavistock," replied Mr. Harris. "I'll see to that. Really, Mrs. Dipper, you ought to come and have a look at the grounds from the terrace. It's a peach of a night and you don't want to have to wait in a stuffy room."

Pauline glanced at Mrs. Tavistock and accepted with a quick smile. Mrs. Tavistock watched her departure with the delighted Harris, and, turning, led her Henry to the sanctuary of the study.

On the way he paused and, peering round the curtain, inspected the scene of his impending ordeal. As he followed Mrs. Tavistock, he attempted to ease the situation with a futile exhibition of bravado.

"Don't worry, Stella," he said. "I may be able to carry it off. Anyhow, I'm better than most of those flat-footed specimens. Not one of them has any idea of how to sway from the hip, and I haven't seen a decent lumberer among the lot."

"Hush," she replied. "Come and sit down here quietly with me for a minute or two."

They entered the study together. It was a room well suited to the furnishing of Lord Mellingham's private requirements. From the miniature telephone exchange to the gigantic Chesterfield, on which the two seated themselves, everything went to prove that solid comfort is the first essential to the successful transaction of a nobleman's private affairs.

"Well, Henry."

"Well."

"You surpass yourself, Henry. You've had some escapades in your time, but——"

"How do you know?"

"Oh, don't be snubby. I know because you've generally come to me to be helped out of them."

"Well, you know that I never undertook this appalling business to please myself."

"I know. It was really due to your mistake in not grasping that Mrs. Dipper was a dancer. But wasn't it rather unnecessary to offer to impersonate her husband at all?"

Talboyes shrugged his shoulders. He did not meet her gentle eyes. He drew a little pattern on the soft carpet with the toe of Lord Mellingham's ample shoe and muttered something about his tender heart.

"I know you have a tender heart, dear Henry," said Mrs. Tavistock wistfully. "But a man who takes a tender heart to a jazz party is like a missionary who takes a tender body to the Cannibal Islands. He's simply asking to get bitten."

"If I were doing this to please myself, I—I wouldn't do it," he protested.

"Of course, I can see that Mrs. Dipper is a very taking woman——"

"I can't. I think she's a singularly unattractive

person, but I didn't think that ought to sway me against her."

"Oh, Henry."

"It's quite true," continued Talboyes in a tone of earnest supplication. "When you appeared on the scene I had already decided to chuck the whole thing and face the consequences. I was very surprised to find that you wanted me to go through with it. I don't mind either way, or rather I mind a good deal both ways. I can't very well beard the furious old lord at this stage, especially now that I am wearing his trousers. It was you who decided that I was to test his credulity as an Esquimaux. Very well then, if you desire me to be Hank, I will be Hank. I don't think there's any very material difficulty about it. Hank seems to me to have one of the softest jobs in the country. I simply rely on your judgment."

Mrs. Tavistock watched his face for a moment in meditative silence. Then she said:

"You are not the only person who has got into trouble in this house through trying to do some one a good turn. There are complications in the situation which you don't realize."

"Well, if there's anything more complicated than gripping a young woman under the knees and spinning, I throw my hand in."

"I want to get away from this house as quickly

and as unostentatiously as possible," said Mrs. Tavistock.

"*You* do too? Well, I'm not surprised to hear that, Stella. It certainly doesn't seem our style of house. My original idea in coming to it was to get away from it as soon as possible, too, and if I'd known what it was like——"

She interposed with a gentle pressure of her hand on his arm.

"Listen, Henry. I am already being gossiped about by everybody in this place. It's my own fault; I should never have come. They all think I am going to marry Lord Mellingham——"

"What?" cried Talboyes. "How on earth can they think that?"

"So I want to lie low and slip away tomorrow morning, before any harm is done. Now you see, my dear Henry, if we were to disclose that my fiancé was in the house all the time in the character of Mr. Dipper it could hardly fail to lead to a great deal of scandal. As it is, they will probably say that I have treated Lord Mellingham in a very ungenerous way, though Heaven knows I have tried not to; but, if this little affair of ours came to be known, poor Lord Mellingham, who is very rich and vulgar, but has treated me with nothing but kindness, would never be allowed to forget it; and I should always be the woman who went out of her way to insult

him. We should find our way into the 'Things we want to know' columns, and there would be snapshots of our wedding in the illustrated dailies entitled 'Sequel to the Mellingham Affair: Practical Jokers Wed.' So you see it's really for my sake that I want you to do your best, and not to be found out. None of these people will ever see Hank and Pauline Dipper again after to-night. In the morning we can take our respective departures and meet somewhere outside. Now you see what I'm getting at."

"Yes I see," said Talboyes, nodding a great many times and pulling contemplatively at his moustache. "But I tell you what, Stella, there's one rather serious drawback, and that is that I certainly shan't be able to dance at these people for many minutes before they find out that I'm an absolute mug at the game."

"There I think you are wrong, Henry. You'll be all right for the first dance—you're simply expected to lumber about in a clumsy sort of way; and, once the audience has got the idea that you are an expert, they'll think anything you do is correct. The chief point in favour of Advanced Art in any form is that the worse you do it the cleverer you are considered."

Talboyes rose and paced the room nervously. Until this moment he had allowed his mind to dwell only upon a hazy vision of his appearance in the ball-

room. He now began to feel as a nervous cricketer feels as he approaches the wicket and finds himself the central figure of the scene which he has been dreamily witnessing from the flattering security of the pavilion.

"What about borrowing a car from the old lord and making a bolt for it?" he asked. "After all, that's what I came here for, and your being here, and also in difficulties, seems rather to point to the advisability of flight."

"Unfortunately," replied Mrs. Tavistock, "I'm not the only woman you have promised to help this evening."

"Stella, I—I'm awfully sorry about that, but you know——"

Mrs. Tavistock rose and caressed him consolingly.

"I understand, dear Henry; only I do trust that these little flutters of yours are only bachelor habits."

"Habits? Dash it, Stella, I've never been so badly involved as this before."

"Well, try and brave it out and all will be well."

"I'll do my best," he replied humbly. "You're not going to leave me, are you, Stella?"

"I must for a few minutes," she answered from the doorway. "There are one or two little affairs to settle about what is going to happen to us to-night. I must see about them."

"Going to happen to us to-night?" repeated Talboyes in horror. "Don't say you are going to spring any more awful secrets about this benighted house on me."

"No, everything will be quite all right. Leave it to me."

"I wish I could," said Talboyes.

"I'll be back in good time to see you through the Esquimaux business."

Talboyes groaned at the thought.

"All right, Stella," he said.

And she slipped from the room with a parting nod of encouragement.

Talboyes was not destined to be left alone for long. It was Wattle who a moment later discovered him in the act of practising elaborate contortions on the hearthrug.

"Pardon me, sir," said the butler, "but the 'ead of the party composing the band desires a word with you."

"The band?" said Talboyes in some alarm. "They don't know me, do they?"

"That is the point, I believe," said Wattle. "I think he wants to see you *re* the question of the tunes you desire them to play for you."

"Oh I don't mind," said Talboyes accommodat-
ingly. "Let's see now——"

"I think you'd best see him," indicated Wattle.

"Had I? All right then—in here, directly that dance is over."

"It is over now," said Wattle.

That the English are not a musical race is said to have been proved by the financial statements of more than one impresario; but the man in the street, seconded by the boy in the street, may always be relied upon to gain and to hand on some intelligible imitation of the melodies in vogue. A long-suffering few still pay their vows to a loftier muse, immune from the ravages of rag-time. A small minority, by no means unenlightened in other subjects, are lacking in any appreciation of music, good or bad.

Music was one of the few subjects in which Talboyes had never taken the smallest interest. He recognized the fact that music could be scored and read by a process similar to that which enthusiasts devoted their attentions to manuscripts of the Chinese. He himself could vaguely repeat a few airs. On the extensive subject of music in general he was a very poor authority indeed. He was now called upon to interview a bandmaster; to bluff him into supposing that he was dealing with an expert on modern music and musical instruments. By treating this person in an off-hand and superior manner he might succeed in disguising his woeful ignorance. As he braced himself for the ordeal the door of the study was flung open and Talboyes shrank back against the

mantelpiece with a little gasp of horrified surprise.

A gigantic negro, clad in a flamboyant travesty of fashionable evening dress, and displaying a long line of teeth whiter than his shirtfront, swaggered into the room. He cocked his head to one side in familiar salutation of Talboyes.

"Oo, Mr. Dipp'r," he began.

"Who the dickens are you?"

The negro showed an even greater expansion of teeth.

"I'm de guy what reg'lates this yer coon band," he said.

"Do you know me?" asked Talboyes suspiciously.

"No suh."

Talboyes drew himself up, determined to assert an air of authority.

"Anyhow, you're the bandmaster, aren't you?" he said carelessly.

"Yep," was the reply. "Yep, I'm the big noise of this partic'lar wire and trap combination." And the negro grinned yet more broadly at his own facetious humour.

The puzzled Talboyes could only murmur an interrogatory: "Oh?"

"I guessed I'd better get a hold of you, Mr. Dipp'r," continued the savage, "so as you could opinion jest which choones you was strong for."

"Indeed?"

"Got me?"

"I beg your—what do you say?"

"Have you got me?"

"Got you?" There seemed to be no question that Talboyes had got this undesirable. The chief concern was what to do with him. "I understand," he said with an effort, "that you desire to find out from me which airs your orchestra is to play during my—er—show. Is that so?"

"Yep."

"I suppose you—you hardly care to select anything at random?"

"No suh."

Talboyes sighed.

"H'm, yes, let's see now," he said, squaring his shoulders bravely. "Of course the more one knows about music the harder it is to decide."

"Sure," agreed the negro.

"Yes, I'm quite sure," continued Talboyes, glancing at him severely. "What—er—what musical instruments have you brought with you?"

"Why, one o' them oidinary quoitettes," was the reply.

"Ye-es?" said Talboyes more encouragingly.

"What else?"

The negro fidgeted. He had a notion that Mr. Dipper was trying to ridicule him.

"Why, jest the usual bunch of artists," he said.

"Oh? How are they—doing?"

"Fine," said the negro. "Say, shall I bring the boys along here, and then we can all get a hold of this?"

"No, I don't think so," said Talboyes.

The negro turned towards the door.

"I guess that'll be better," he insisted. "Then you can put the whole bunch wise to the dope."

He departed hastily. Talboyes wiped his brow. He hurried to the doorway and directed a nervous glance towards the direction in which Mrs. Dipper had disappeared with Harris. There was no sign of her. Talboyes took a few steps forward and scanned the staircase. No guardian angel appeared. Talboyes returned dejectedly to the study, closely followed by his former interlocutor, who was now accompanied by three satellites. Two of these carried banjos and the third a pair of drumsticks. All grinned.

"Now, suh," said the leader, "which o' them choones?"

Talboyes closed the door and marched across to the fireplace, his hands behind him. His attitude was intended to appear Napoleonic. He turned and faced the four dark, grinning countenances, and cleared his throat.

"The dance I intend to do first," he announced,

"requires a rather peculiar tune. In fact, almost any tune will do, because—well, no tune would really *do*, so that one tune will really do as well as any other."

"Gee," said the leader, "what kind o' tempo will this be?"

"If," continued Talboyes, ignoring this question, "you will play one of your loudest tunes, I dare say that may do something towards distracting attention from the dancing."

"Hear that, boys?" put in the leader. "We ain't a got to do that foity."

"Now suppose," said Talboyes, turning to the last speaker, "that you hum a tune. Any tune will do. Then I shall be able to say whether it will—er—do."

"What beat, Mr. Dipp'r, what tempo?"

"Ah, yes, I see—what tempo? Yes, of course. Well, look here, I tell you what. I'll hum a tune instead, and that will give you a good idea of the sort of thing I mean. There's a tune I remember that might do; let me see—it goes something like this."

The negroes craned their necks and listened attentively. Talboyes, waving a forefinger gracefully to and fro, commenced a laboured and unmusical rendering of a forgotten Victorian ballad.

"Dee-dee—deedee-dee—do you remember the

thing?—*dee-dee deedee-dee—deedy-dee deedy-dee deedy-deedy dee.*”

“Sounds like ‘Get a hunch’ to me,” volunteered one of the banjo players.

“Fade, Walter, fade,” replied his partner. “That’s ‘Some Choosable Kid,’ that song is.”

“It’s ‘Bundunna,’ ” said the negro with the drumsticks.

Almost immediately the whole band was involved in an argument of the most verbose and disordered nature. Talboyes, overcome, walked to the farthest corner of the room, where he held his head in silence.

The leader succeeded in restoring order only by drowning the voices of his zealous confrères.

“Cut it out!” he shouted. “We got to get away back. Say, Digby, pick out that there ‘Choosable Kid’ and let Mr. Dipp’r say if that’s the goods. Pick it good and soft.”

The second banjoist complied. He struck a few preliminary chords and broke into a lively measure in which the air strove vainly to assert itself above the extravagances of accompaniment with which the expert embellished his performance. To make matters worse, the trap-drummer felt called upon to demonstrate his skill with the sticks, and proceeded to rattle with great heartiness on the edge of the table, emphasizing now and again some important note or equally important lapse of a note in the

hidden melody with a well-timed blow at an ink-pot, a brass letter-weight or any of the convenient articles to be found on his lordship's study table. Talboyes expected every moment to see the figure of the outraged host appear to demand an explanation of the din. The last straw was supplied by the leader, who became so carried away by the skill of his subordinates that he began, at the recognised time, to chant, as was his custom, the enigmatic words of the chorus:

"Gee, you're some choosable Kid, I'm goin' to choose you
to be mine—fine—

Yer got that choosable style,

Yer got that cu' lill smile,

So meet me back on the choo-choo track——"

"No, no, no," interrupted Talboyes, coming forward hastily and staying the enthusiasm of the drummer with a decisive hand. "I didn't—I didn't refer to that at all." He turned to the leader with a frown of annoyance. "This song of mine was in English. I—I can't remember anything else about it, but it was certainly nothing like that. Now I come to think of it I believe it was something about roses, but it——"

"Roses?" cried the leader, showing fresh animation at this hint. "Was it 'Rose o' Tennessee'?"

"No, it was not," said Talboyes defiantly.

The negroes were not, however, to be so easily discouraged. Talboyes had made mention of a subject to which their repertoire contained ample allusion. They vied in noisy suggestions.

“‘Some Cosy rosy’?”

“‘Ma Mason-Dixie Rose’?”

“‘Kentucky Rose’?”

“‘Rose, you’re thoiny’?”

“‘There is roses in the corner of my garden p-lot’?”

“‘Rose B-lossom’?”

“‘Ma allotment rose’?”

“‘Rosy, quit your bud’?”

“‘Oh, Rose-Mary’?”

There was a brief pause. Apparently the catalogue was exhausted. Then one of the banjoists had another inspiration.

“I got it,” he cried. “‘I don’t want no roses’?”

“N—o, I don’t think *I* do now,” said Talboyes. “I think we can’t do better than have just a simple melody—an old friend. An old friend like—er—like ‘Annie Laurie’.”

Perplexity was written upon every dark countenance.

“*How’s* that?” inquired the leader gravely.

“‘Annie Laurie’ or, if you like—er—‘Abide with me’.”

“Say, Mr. Dipp’r,” confessed the leader with a

guilty glance towards his companions, "we don't hold *them*. I guess you got us beat."

"That there 'Abide with me'," said one of the banjoists, anxious to come to the rescue, "ain't that one o' them numbers from 'Wiggle-Woggle'?"

"Nix," replied the trap-drummer. "That's 'Stop here the night'."

The negroes were on the point of commencing another argument when Talboyes again stepped in.

"You don't know 'Annie Laurie'?" he asked of the leader in incredulous tones.

"No, suh, I don't get you. You come it too quick on me."

"Well, the only thing will be for Mrs. Dipper to decide presently when she's disengaged," said Talboyes in desperation.

"Say, can't you come across right now?" grumbled the leader.

"Certainly not," replied Talboyes. "I intend to wait here for Mrs. Dipper. When she comes I'll let you know what to play—if you can play it, which seems doubtful. I've never seen such a band. I can tell you more about music and musical instruments than you've ever dreamt of. You don't even know 'Annie Laurie'. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves. Go away, go away."

"Say," protested the negro, "who is this Annie anyway? If you've got her with you, I'll learn her."

"Go away, go away," repeated Talboyes.

The disgruntled negro turned to his followers.

"Here boys," he said, "beat it back to that there dance hall."

Still arguing, the negroes departed. After allowing them a moment in which to gain the ball-room, Talboyes made another sally. This time he ran into Lord Mellingham, and again retreated into the study in confusion.

"Have you completed your arrangements?" demanded his lordship, as he followed.

"Yes, that is not quite, my old lordsh—my lord. Mrs. Shipper—my wife isn't here for the moment."

"I suppose there is no further hitch?" asked Lord Mellingham sardonically.

"Hitch? Oh no," said Talboyes amiably. "Everything's going splendidly."

"Am I to understand then that you are ready?"

"Yes—that is very nearly; in fact, quite. But not knowing exactly where my wife is——"

"Come, come, Mr. Dipper, look alive, sir."

"A what?"

"Alive I said," repeated his lordship with growing impatience, "I am disagreeably surprised at your attitude."

Talboyes smiled sheepishly.

"I've got some attitudes coming which I hope will compensate," he said politely.

"So I have been given to understand. But I desire to make it clear to you, Mr. Dipper, that, in my estimation, no first-class artiste would trifle with his engagements however advanced his reputation and proficiency in the——" and his lordship threw a wealth of contempt into the word—"in the juzz." He turned and departed with great dignity. Pausing in the doorway he added, "After one more dance then. Pray find your wife."

Talboyes bit his lip and kicked a leather footstool in lieu of its owner. He left the study and proceeded across the hall in search of Pauline. At the foot of the stairs he paused. Stella was taking a long time over her rather secret mission connected with the night's destinies. Should he go in search of her? With his foot on the bottom stair he was arrested by the sudden appearance at his shoulder of a dark maiden, who was gazing rapturously into his face with large, appealing eyes.

"Oh, please excuse me; I know I ought not to speak to you," she said.

"Why not?" asked Talboyes, on the defensive.

"Because we have never met."

"Oh, haven't we? Good. I mean——"

"You are Mr. Dipper, are you not?"

Talboyes compromised by bowing.

"You must excuse me," she continued hastily, looking around her as though in fear of being overheard.

"I so particularly wanted a word with you. My name's Helen Monk."

Talboyes started. The name was vaguely familiar. He bowed again, watching the dark girl closely. She was probably the bearer of some private message from Mrs. Tavistock. His rather addled brain seemed to connect her with that lady.

"I wanted to speak to you about something rather delicate."

"Delicate?"

"Yes. I know I ought not to come and speak to you at all, but this is not a subject one can discuss in public. People have such conventional ideas."

Talboyes shifted nervously.

"I wanted," proceeded Helen, dropping her voice, "to talk to you about clothes. I have been so interested to see those articles of yours."

Talboyes' fingers strayed over his person. Was this some secret injunction from Stella concerning his attire? The girl paused for a reply, so he remarked:

"They're not really mine, you know?"

"Not yours?" echoed Helen in a highly-pitched voice of remonstrance. "Oh, but they are so full of weighty matter. I have studied each of them in turn and done my best to discover what was, so to speak, behind them."

Talboyes took refuge up two stairs.

"Didn't you really write them yourself?" said Helen plaintively.

Talboyes descended the two stairs again.

"Oh, *those* articles?"

"Yes, the articles in the 'Society Lady.' I thought they bore your name."

"Oh, yes, yes. The articles in the 'Society Lady.' Oh, yes."

"Yes, about hygienic underclothing for ladies."

"Oh my—h'm—yes, no," stammered Talboyes, making another movement towards the stairs. "No, as I say, they're not really mine."

"It is a subject I particularly wanted to take up with you," said Helen earnestly.

"Ah, no—not with me, I'm afraid," said Talboyes.

"No, you see, I—I only lent my name."

The disillusioned enthusiast turned with a sigh.

"Oh dear," she quavered, "I *am* disappointed. And I did so want to try and show you my own little views."

"Thank you, yes," said Talboyes, relieved by signs of her departure, "but I'm so busy just now—if—if you wouldn't mind my seeing them some other time—I mean——"

At this moment Mrs. Tavistock, accompanied by Pauline, hove in sight at the bend of the stairs. Helen regarded Talboyes with one final, lingering look, more in sorrow than in anger.

"Oh, dear. Good-bye," she said.

"Good-bye," said Talboys with alacrity.

Mrs. Tavistock quickened her step. There was no need for her Henry to inform her that he was again in abject need of her solicitude.

"*Now* what on earth is the matter?" she asked.

Talboyes indicated the retreating figure of Helen.

"That girl, Melon H——"

"Helen Monk?"

"Yes—has been talking to me."

"Helen has? What about?"

"I scarcely like to repeat it." He turned to Pauline as she joined them. "Hank seems to be a pretty queer fish," he remarked.

"I warned you not to talk to people," snapped Pauline. "I suppose you've been doing your best to ruin everything."

"Oh, Mrs. Dipper, that is not very fair," said Mrs. Tavistock gently. "He's being perfectly splendid." There was nevertheless a trace of anxiety in her manner as she asked Talboyes to report progress. "I'm sure everything is all right, isn't it, Henry? Who else have you been talking to?"

"Only those damned niggers and the old lord. He's in a hurry for us."

"I expect you've already ruined the whole show," grumbled Pauline.

"I like that," he cried. "As a matter of fact, I

have emerged from some appalling intricacies with great credit."

"That's the spirit," exhorted Mrs. Tavistock. "A little dash goes a long way."

"Does it?" said Talboyes dismally. "I should say that in this beastly house a little goes a dash long way. I am getting more and more involved in the most awful trouble."

"Have you gone and given yourself away?" asked Pauline quickly.

"The only person I've given myself away to is you," he answered with some warmth. "I think you might show greater appreciation of the gift."

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. Tavistock soothingly. "There's nothing to be worried about. We've just settled the one trifling difficulty."

"One! Here have I been grappling with a whole series of the most menacing dilemmas, and you talk about one trifling difficulty, Stella."

"She means our bedroom," said Pauline.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I suppose you noticed that they had given us a double bedroom?"

Talboyes had not considered this point. What consequences had he counted in that mad moment when he had bent over the weeping Mrs. Dipper and yielded his unconditional services to her?

"It will be all right, though," added Pauline.

"It will be nothing of the sort."

Mrs. Tavistock hastened to explain.

"We have arranged that you shall sleep in my room, Henry. Mrs. Dipper and I will share the double room. When we turn in, which will probably be in the small hours, you must just come along quietly to my room and I will go and join her."

"It's all perfectly simple," said Pauline.

"Oh, perfectly!" said Talboyes ironically. "Especially when the maid brings the tea in the morning and finds me asleep in your bed!"

"You can get up early and go out," said Pauline. "And then Mrs. Tavistock can nip back into her own room."

"Oh, yes, I dare say!" objected Talboyes. "But I may not want to get up early; and in any case this is going to be very tricky work—coming quietly along and getting into other people's beds and getting out again and nipping about."

Mrs. Tavistock pulled his sleeve. The band had ceased playing. Through the ball-room doorway Lord Mellingham plunged expectantly into the hall.

"Ah! You are ready?"

"Yes your bedsh—lordship, at least I think so," said Talboyes, catching his breath and glancing at Pauline.

"You must be," cried the peer. "All this indecision is grossly out of keeping with your reputation."

Look at the hour. My supper will be ready before you are, sir."

Talboyes turned humiliated eyes to the clock. Good heavens! It was nearly midnight. He had indeed carried dalliance farther than he could reasonably have hoped. But now his hour was come. Modest, meek-spirited fool that he was—how could he cope with the degrading menace of that ball-room?

"My guests are growing impatient. You have come to this house with a given purpose, namely to jazz. I feel justified in demanding that you proceed to jazz forthwith."

Pauline uttered a quick, nervous laugh.

"You'll find it's been worth waiting for," she said.

"I am glad to hear it. I am not myself an expert; but I may tell you that I anticipated no ordinary display when I saw the amount of your fee."

"That's our usual charge," said Pauline sharply.

"I have no desire to challenge it, madam."

"That's all right then," whispered Talboyes with a nod to Pauline. A silly sort of notion suggested to his mind that this relieved the situation considerably.

"But I am surprised, nevertheless," continued his lordship. "You, sir, arrive late and I actually have to provide you with a conventional evening costume from my own private wardrobe. From the outset I have used every endeavour to facilitate your

arrangements. This lady has most graciously consented to aid your preparations. I have even provided a double room in my congested house for you and Mrs. Dipper. I do not for a moment suppose that you expected anything so pleasant."

"This lady has certainly been extremely thoughtful," admitted Talboyes humbly. "And I am sure that giving us that room was kindly meant."

"Kindly meant indeed! I should have thought that you would have expressed the utmost gratification at such an arrangement. In return I must point to the immediate fulfilment of your contract. It is most important that my guests be entertained. There are some of the most distinguished County families represented here to-night, sir. I consider it no small privilege for you to juzz before them."

"It's—it's no common experience for me, I'm sure," said Talboyes plaintively.

"Come, sir, are you ready?" cried his indignant lordship.

Talboyes felt himself goaded suddenly from shame into hot resentment at this ill-mannered, self-important old brute, who had dared to lure Stella to his distinguished, opulent house-party and gloat over her.

"My lord—yes!" he cried. "Ready? Yes. I'll show you—I'll show you my—my—my—capabilities."

"I think they've started another dance now," re-

marked Pauline. "The band has started again."

"I will stop the band," snorted Lord Mellingham. "The band is merely killing time."

"It always does that," growled Talboyes in an undertone.

Lord Mellingham returned to the doorway, where he stood and clapped his hands twice. After a moment the sounds of the band ceased. Talboyes followed his host, as though about to assault him. He was quivering—unbalanced. He seemed to be fired by a frenzied desire to dash into the ball-room and to fling off the confiction of emotions which crowded his brain—shame, anxiety, loathing of this detestable house-party and its inflated patron. From over Lord Mellingham's shoulder he summoned the band leader with a peremptory wave of the arm.

"Come here, you," he said.

The negro, grinning, complied. Talboyes turned to Pauline.

"What tune are these shattering creatures to imitate?" he asked sternly.

"Any one-step; only rather slow. 'Choosable Kid' will do. But slow, mind."

"There you are," said Talboyes. "'Jazzable Kid'—only slow. Off you go. Do your worst. Now"—and he turned his attention to Lord Mellingham—"if you will kindly clear the floor and tell them that we're going to do the Esquimaux"—what is it?"

"'The Esquimaux' Lumber,'" said Pauline, "and please add that it's an eccentric dance and this is the first time it has been performed in public."

Lord Mellingham, considerably appeased by the sudden businesslike awakening of the Dippers, nodded cordially, threw back his chest and cleared his throat. Some eager country guest, who had been watching the Dippers through the open doorway, noticed this and said "S-sh." The sound was taken up, and gradually the whole room resounded with one prolonged "S-ssh," which continued long after all other noises had ceased.

"Mr. and Mrs. Dipper will now perform, for the first time I am informed," announced his lordship, "an eccentric dance bearing the title of 'The Esquimaux' Slumber'."

"Lumber, you—my o—Lumber, my lord," asserted the voice of the male dancer.

"Oh, I beg your pardon. 'The Esquimaux' Lumber'."

Applause broke forth within the ball-room. Lord Mellingham beamed his acknowledgments and marched through the doorway.

"Bravo! That's the spirit!" said Mrs. Tavistock.

Talboyes turned to her quickly. She had never seen him so excited and worked up.

"He shouldn't speak in that way to decent people," he said. "He brought it on himself. Confound this!

Does he think I'm afraid of him and his jazzing friends? One plain, sensible man could tackle all this crowd and I'll just show you how it's done. Distinguished families indeed! Nothing but a lot of flat-headed noodles with too much money. I haven't any compunction about imposing on this sort of place. Look at this!" He indicated the elaborate vehicular cake-stand at his elbow. "Sandwiches on wheels! What an awful place! I haven't engaged in a rag for twenty-five years; but this house and this crowd are too much for me."

"Splendid! Go ahead!" said Mrs. Tavistock. "The band's struck up."

Talboyes faltered. For a moment the sound seemed to knock all the impetuosity out of him as concussion knocks the vigour from a spinning top.

"Catch hold of me," said Pauline. "We dance in through the open doorway."

"Er—now?" asked Talboyes, pausing to wipe his brow with an apprehensive glance towards the scene of action.

"Yes, now. Do your best. Don't do anything unnatural to you. Just lumber like an Esquimaux. When I disengage and step backwards from you, lumber after me. It doesn't matter if you look a fool; you're meant to. When I whisper 'Swing' and 'Knees,' you know what to do."

He nodded without stirring another muscle.

"Now," said Pauline. "Ready? Forward!"

"Stella!" gasped Talboyes.

"Be brave, Henry; you can do it."

"Oh, I can't. I shall fail. It will be awful."

"You won't fail. Go in and tackle them. Are you afraid of him and his jazzing friends?"

"No!" cried Talboyes. "No, by Heaven! Forward!"

He clasped Pauline and charged gallantly through the doorway.

CHAPTER IX

LORD MELLINGHAM was, as he confessed, no judge of modern dancing; but he carefully took up a position in the ball-room alongside certain of his guests who were better qualified to decide whether he was to applaud or to condemn the initial performance of the Dippers. Mr. Harris had by this time become a strong partisan, and had decided, before even the dance commenced, that Mrs. Dipper, at all events, was "a top-liner". Mr. Harry Pink was neutral, with a strong leaning towards approbation, by reason of his desire to do the right thing.

Mrs. Buzzard Knowles, of Coombe Puddy, however, displayed antagonism from the moment when she beheld Mrs. Dipper's costume, which she knew to be smart and costly. Her sonorous remark to Lord Mellingham, "Gracious! What an appropriate costume for an Esquimaux," was itself as biting as the Arctic wind. Mrs. Appleby, of London, who had shown her independence by condemning the Dippers in advance, seconded this with a rather raucous

laugh, which was mistaken by the audience for a sign that the dance was intended to be humorous and proved of immense value to the performers.

It was unlikely that this point would have remained in doubt for long. If, at the first moment of the dancers' entrance, all eyes had been turned to Pauline in admiration or criticism, according to the sex of the possessor, her partner was not long in establishing himself the centre of attraction. Whether the frozen dwellers of the North are ever permitted to feel the emotions of passionate enthusiasm melting their benumbed veins, neither he nor any of his audience knew; but it is certain that seldom has Esquimaux been stimulated to such paroxysms of ecstatic frenzy as this. His eyes rolled wildly; his teeth were set in a grinning grimace. His knees were slightly bent, giving his figure a foreshortened, crouching appearance. The arms with which he clung to his partner, as though she were his most cherished prize, looked longer than was natural, owing to the unwonted amplitude of sleeve; and his costume in general was well adapted to his conception of exultant savagery.

The woman—some siren of the dark regions it seemed—lured her ungainly suitor whither she would. Her head was poised upright, as if she were keeping her lips, which wore a tantalizing smile, at a tantalizing distance. Her nimble feet performed

the difficult task of synchronizing with both the orchestral accompaniment and the more indefinite steps of the male Esquimaux without apparent effort. Pauline was in truth a brilliant dancer. Never had so arduous a duty as this been demanded of her, and she was carrying it through with all the appearance of ease and enjoyment. Talboyes was putting in some creditable, if rather excessive, swaying from the hip.

Lord Mellingham, still following the progress of the dance and its effect upon the guests with dubious eyes, inclined his head toward Mr. Harris and inquired his opinion.

"Ow, I knew that girl could dance; knew it directly I saw the movement of her shoulders when she walked. Man's damn good in this too, isn't he? I should say they're both tip-top, though o'course you can't judge altogether by this. I should like to see 'em do a proper ball-room turn. Didn't know they were going to hand out this 'eccentric' stuff."

"I think this is a topping show," observed Mr. Harry Pink, in a gratuitous whisper. "Topping. The man is topping. So's she, by Jove. She's a topping little dancer. They're both of them topping in my opinion. The sort of way she leads him on. See? That's what I mean. I call that simply topping."

"I think the man is rather indecent," said Mrs. Buzzard Knowles.

"Ow, that's all part of it," explained Mr. Harris. "You can't have your eccentric stuff refined. You might as well dress a revue chorus in coats and skirts."

From the curtained doorway Mrs. Tavistock studied every feature of the scene, now craning forward slightly to note the effect on a certain section of the onlookers, now glancing quickly back to the dancers, prompted by an outbreak of laughter. Pauline had disengaged herself from her partner's embrace and, with a series of neat skips, eluded him as he flounced after her, beating his sides with his great hanging arms and uttering strange grunting noises. Soon he caught her, seized her below the knees with his left hand and lifted her with masterful ease. He carried her prone body round slowly to left and right in turn, as though seeking where to deposit her; his eyes rolling in triumphant deliberation. Then, with a weird, guttural snort of elation, he commenced what the audience recognized as a grotesque imitation of that dual whirl which constitutes the *pièce de résistance* of so many eccentric dancing interludes. It was a masterpiece of bungling parody. The laughter and applause became general and unstinted. Even Mrs. Buzzard Knowles tapped a gratulatory fan.

Lord Mellingham anxiously studied the faces in the large circle of onlookers. There could be little doubt of the unqualified success of the Lumber. The

very orchestra seemed to be inspired to an unprecedented zest; the banjoists inserting every variety of interpolated oddities between the well-marked beats of "Some Choosable Kid," the drummer, in a paroxysm of enthusiasm, flinging his stick to the ceiling, catching it deftly and dealing with it a smashing blow upon a gong at the requisite moment. The heads and shoulders of even the more elderly chaperons were gyrating in abandoned delight, reckless of their *coiffure*. Rather uncalled-for vocal embellishments of the tune mingled with the laughter and applause; while the eyes of every member of the audience followed the movements of the dancers with the keenest relish.

The delighted peer again turned his attention to the performers. Unfamiliar as he was with Terpsichore in her riotous modern guise, he could not fail to remark the fact that the Dippers possessed certain idiosyncrasies which justified the confidence of their agents and utterly confounded the prejudice of his town guests. This was particularly noteworthy in the case of the husband. The male performer of a dancing partnership is usually contented to play the part of the strong and silent, if agile, prop against which the female comes to rest at given periods in her manoeuvres. No such methods sufficed this specialist. Even at such times as his partner drew the general attention with some remarkable development of

her art, he never wavered in his insistent rendering of the passionate Esquimaux. Lord Mellingham noted, however, with some surprise that he was beginning to display unmistakable signs of fatigue. His mouth was wide open; and, though he pursued his inamorata with undiminished frenzy, loud gasps of physical distress were audible with every breath he emitted. This was strange; surely a man of his profession must be more highly trained than this—even though his corpulence was greater than was usual in such cases. Then Lord Mellingham realized from the increasing mirth of his guests that this was an assumed feature of Mr. Dipper's display, and he beaming again. The man was an artist. Even he, the host, was justified in acknowledging the fact.

His lordship turned to Mr. Pink.

"A pantomimist of no mean order," he commented.

"Topping," agreed Mr. Pink.

On all sides now the verdict was the same. The dance was original, primitive, unrefined, delicious, clever, topping and calculated to take London by storm.

Once more the frantic wooer succeeded in gaining his objective. He clasped her to his bulging shirt-front, his lips uttering some grotesque sentiment of primeval passion in her ear.

"I wonder what he's supposed to be saying to her," said Mrs. Duckingham Leape.

"I don't," said Mr. Harris.

"I don't think he said anything really," put in a lady guest.

She was wrong. The male Esquimaux had spoken, though his voice was so faint and his breath so scanty that above the din of the band and the laughter even Pauline found it difficult to distinguish the words: "Oh—let's drop—I'm stopping—strop—dropping—stop."

The female Esquimaux leant gracefully backwards from his grasp, until she was bent almost double, in which position she continued to toy with his affections, shaking her head coyly. But he would take no denial. Seizing his opportunity he secured her resolutely beneath the knees, clasped her firmly in his strong arms, took two paces towards the door, hesitated a moment, returned, executed one final exultant whirl and plunged with his booty into the Armorial Hall. At the same moment the band judiciously gave vent to that musical catchphrase of four notes and two crashes which may be described as the ragtime for Amen, after which the leader popped his head up from the piano with a broad grin of satisfaction and delivered himself of the probably rhetorical inquiry, "Have you got me, Steve?"

To Lord Mellingham's gratification, a consider-

able portion of the enthusiasm which followed was reserved for himself. Amid the loud calls of "Encore," and clapping of hands, Mr. Harris grasped his sleeve and exclaimed:

"Withdraw all I said before the ball—you've unearthed a top-line dance-act, old boy—fine—you ought to be in the business."

A sentiment which was echoed in a variety of terms by the adjoining guests, while those who were out of ear-shot of his lordship contented themselves by energetically recalling the performers.

Talboyes had fallen into a chair in the Armorial Hall. His head was lowered and nodding in time with his deep breathing. One fist was clenched to his chest. Pauline stood beside him, adjusting the effects of the Lumber on her appearance with her slim, neat fingers. Her eyes were bright with the excitement of success. Mrs. Tavistock still hovered watchfully at the entrance, like a stage-manager of amateur theatricals, with an eye for both sides of the curtain.

Pauline glanced down in lenient impatience at the associate of her triumph.

"Come and take a call," she said. "We must follow this up while it's hot."

Talboyes raised his head slowly.

"I can't—do any more," he said. "As for fol-

lowing up something hot, I wish you wouldn't even say such things."

"Well, you can get up and bow, can't you?"

He rose with abrupt clumsiness like a goaded ox and accompanied her towards the ball-room, from which bursts of applause still re-echoed. Mrs. Tavistock, with a happy smile, intercepted him.

"Splendid, Henry!" she whispered.

He made no reply. Success seemed almost to have intensified his misery. He made his obeisance in the doorway to a renewed volley of clapping and insistent cries of "Encore". He felt his features distend automatically in a false smile.

Pauline's hand had somehow found its way into his own. He released it readily as he stepped back from the doorway. From the curtain at his side the felicitous voice of Stella greeted his return. He edged out of view of the ball-room and met her eyes with a queer little smile of shame.

"Henry, it was wonderful! How did you do it?"

"I don't know," he replied. "I don't even know what it was I did."

"It has been a terrific success anyhow," she assured him. "You must follow up your advantage."

He moaned, mopping his forehead.

"All this following up is more than I bargained for," he said.

"What I mean is, don't let them lose their first im-

pression of you. Look a little more pleased and confident. There's nothing to worry about now. You've got all these people absolutely cold."

"Oh, cold? That's better," said Talboyes.

Mrs. Tavistock left his side and crossed the hall to where Pauline was standing. A moment later the figure of Lord Mellingham blocked the doorway.

"Ah!" said the peer advancing. "Capital! Your display delighted my guests. You will favour us, I am confident, with another."

All the brusque impatience of his manner had subsided as the bubbling heat subsides from a pudding. He beamed on Talboyes, radiating patronage. The latter collected himself with an effort and faced the peer with an attempt to assume pleasure and confidence which resolved into an intimidated smirk.

"It's exceedingly kind of your guests—of you—of your guests and you—of you and your g——"

"We don't generally take encores, you know," said Pauline. "Of course we're awfully glad you want one and all that, but it isn't done as a rule."

"It is not done?"

"No, not in a dance turn, unless it's fixed up beforehand, when the first number's cut short on purpose. It isn't like a song, you see; it takes it out of you a bit, and you can't do yourself justice again bang off."

"Oh," said Lord Mellingham blankly, turning to Talboyes who nodded knowledgeably.

"I think that is quite reasonable, Lord Mellingham," put in Mrs. Tavistock. "I should be inclined to let Mr. and Mrs. Dipper reserve their energies."

"If you think so, by all means," said the peer fondly.

"Yes, don't you? Let them wait in the study. You can send word along when you want them again. It isn't as if they were only going to make one appearance."

She glanced at Talboyes. His eyes were upturned as though in prayer.

Lord Mellingham assented with a gracious inclination of the head. Turning, he addressed himself to a lurking group of guests at the ball-room entrance.

"Mr. and Mrs. Dipper will entertain us again later," he announced. "Meanwhile I suggest a resumption of the general jazz."

Pauline was already at the study door, whither after a pitiable look at Mrs. Tavistock Talboyes followed her, dragging his ill-fitting dress clothes across the hall like a large shaggy dog obedient to involuntary exercise.

"My dear lady," said Lord Mellingham, returning just as the study door closed behind the dancing partners, "you witnessed the performance I trust? I failed to see you enter the ball-room."

"I was rather at the back, but I saw beautifully. It was wonderfully good, wasn't it? Anybody can do ordinary ball-room dances with a few trick steps, but it takes an extraordinarily clever man to caricature it as he does."

"Yes, the man is an accomplished buffoon," agreed his lordship. "I suppose, however," he added rolling his head slowly to one side, "that their talents range beyond the grotesque. It was my intention to engage exponents of what you refer to as the ordinary ball-room dances."

"Well, I should keep that dark if I could get the credit for such an original attraction as this," replied Mrs. Tavistock tersely.

His face rippled with appreciation of her shrewdness.

"True," he remarked, "true. And indeed I am pleased to have afforded the encouragement. They appear to have been in need of it. Judging from his demeanour the husband, at all events, is more at ease in the canteen than the drawing-room."

"He is not a bad man really," said Mrs. Tavistock restlessly. "I have seen something of them to-night and——"

He interrupted her with an effervescence of compliment.

"You have indeed. You have constituted yourself their prompter. I cannot thank you enough for

the service, which I should have been the last to have imposed upon you. It is you I have to thank for their success and mine."

Mrs. Tavistock smiled. The desperate ruse had prospered. For the moment they were secure from suspicion and disaster. The gullible peer and his self-centred gratitude moved her almost to shame and pity.

"No, no," she said quickly, "I like getting to know people like that—uncommon people."

"Hardly the epithet I should have chosen," said Lord Mellingham with forbearing jocularly.

"People who have a—a struggle are always worth knowing," she continued. "These people are like that. They have—told me something of their circumstances. Both of them have known what it is to be in difficulties."

"Indeed?" said Lord Mellingham without emotion.

"Yes—the woman, in the first place, has had a troubled time. She has told me about it. This is not her first husband——"

"Dear lady, is that an insuperable adversity?" said Lord Mellingham with a sudden inspiration. "Come let us sit on the terrace."

As he spoke the opening chords of "My Mason-Dixie Rose" burst from the ball-room.

"Presently," said Mrs. Tavistock, excusing her-

self with a winning smile. "I've promised to dance this."

He raised a plump, protesting hand.

"Ah, come with me," he pleaded, only to turn from her with a start, as Wattle put in an apologetic appearance from the dining-room with rumours of supper.

"What, what, oh what?" asked his lordship testily.

Mrs. Tavistock slipped into the ball-room. The Esquimaux' Lumber was not without its analogy.

Ten minutes later she reconnoitred her way into the study. Talboyes was seated on the Chesterfield, a woebegone figure. Pauline, astride the writing-table, was skimming the pages of an illustrated weekly with an air of unconcern. Mrs. Tavistock seated herself beside Talboyes and patted his baggy knee encouragingly.

"Why be so dismal about a glorious victory, dear Henry?" she asked.

"Victory!" he muttered. He looked at her with a slow, sad shake of his head. "I've done it," he continued, "that's the point. It's the awful realization. It's easy enough to imagine oneself capering about like a madman before a crowd of people, but I've done it. It was all an appalling sort of dream. God knows what excesses I committed."

"But you were magnificent. It couldn't have been better, could it, Mrs. Dipper?"

Pauline jerked her chin with a bitter little laugh, without raising her eyes. Talboyes spread out his hands before him.

"The consequences!" he said. "Think! All this is bound to come out. My clerks will know me as Hank. Club waiters will lumber at me with my lunch."

Mrs. Tavistock rose briskly from the Chesterfield.

"Good heavens, Henry," she said, "what has happened to your sense of humour? You're the hero of the moment. You flounced in and out of that room and muddled about in rather voluminous trousers, and you've left the entire crowd of County representatives open-mouthed in admiration."

He glanced up at her curiously.

"They laughed," he said in an injured tone.

"Best thing they could have done, for our purpose," she replied. "Besides, you didn't intend your Esquimaux to be a thing of pathos, did you?"

"No, but these wretched people seem to have no perception."

"Well, goodness me, Henry, that's our one salvation. They may be fools, but, if so, we've every reason to suffer them gladly."

Very gradually his worried frown gave place to a contemplative smile. It broadened.

"By Jove, yes, Stella," he exclaimed. "I may have made a fool of myself, but there are others."

"Oh, the laugh's with you all right," put in Pauline casually from the table.

"That's better," said Mrs. Tavistock. "That's the spirit, Henry. Now take full advantage of them. I shall have to leave you to your own devices; I can't be seen hanging round you the whole evening. It is supper-time. After supper you will be called upon to perform again. Have you decided what you are going to do?"

Talboyes blew out his cheeks in the manner of a baffled mathematician.

"I can only do what I did before, and only then if worked up to it," he observed.

"It seems to depend on the supper," said Pauline. She sat upright and turned a supplicatory glance towards Mrs. Tavistock. "Can you help us again with an idea?" she asked.

Mrs. Tavistock deliberated, taking measure of Talboyes with half-closed eyes.

"I should think a minuet is about your mark, dear Henry," she said. "Why not 'The Minuet Jazz'? The old-world dancer enticed from his wonted decorum by the vision of his gay successor. I should think that would do splendidly. You can borrow a sword from the Armorial Hall, Henry; and don't, whatever you do, try to be funny, and you'll make another roaring success."

CHAPTER X

SUPPER was in keeping with the traditions of Mellingham Hall. The night was far spent when Wattle entered the study with the summons for the second interlude, and emerged, with all the consequence of an assistant executioner, to crave the loan of the sword.

Talboyes advanced to the ball-room doorway and eyed the expectant throng. Lord Mellingham was in his favourite position by the fireplace, with Mrs. Tavistock at his side. An unnerving round of applause greeted Talboyes' appearance. He flinched perceptibly, his lips moving as though repeating the opening words of a speech.

"Ha ha!" cried Mr. Pink encouragingly. "This is going to be topping."

In the study Talboyes had taken all the necessary precautions. He had practised the Minuet Jazz with Pauline, he had witnessed her instructions to the band, he had eaten a reasonably hearty supper, and he had rehearsed the announcement of the simple title of the dance a score of times with a variety of vocal inflections. Why this nervous indecision? He

glanced shyly towards the fireplace and mastered himself with an effort.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Minuet Gin—Maz—Minuet Jazz."

Laughter, a buzz of interest and sporadic clapping.

The leading negro, who seemed possessed of some ostrich theory that to cross the floor at a pronounced stoop rendered him invisible to the audience, returned to his post from a final coaching by Pauline in the hall. The music commenced. The Dippers entered. The Spirit of the Old-World Dance initiated his performance by tripping over his sword. The success of the dance was practically assured.

Mrs. Tavistock looked quickly at Lord Mellingham. He was noting the effect of the Minuet Jazz on his audience, raising his eyebrows at admiring ladies. She slipped from his side, passed quietly behind the craning guests, and made her way unobtrusively to the door. Something, appearing round the curtained corner, had caught her watchful eye—something which caused her to catch her breath with a quick thrill of intuitive foreboding. She had seen the face of Wattle, screwed into an unnatural expression of protest and dismay, and in the background, half-hidden by the butler's obtrusive shoulders, the shadowy figure of a man unknown.

She gained the doorway.

"Wattle, that man?" she asked in an articulate

whisper above the din of the band. "Who is he? What does he want here?"

"'E is a very strange man indeed, madam," replied the butler in throaty confidence.

"How did he get in?"

"The front door was open owing to the 'eat."

"But what is he doing here?"

"Says he wishes to see Mrs. Dipper, madam."

"But can't he wait outside?"

"Madam, 'is manner is harrogant. I requested 'im—'ardly caring to use force."

"Ah, well, I think I know all about him, Wattle. You had better leave me to deal with him."

"Madam, the man is, if I may say so, 'ardly——"

"It's all right, Wattle, you may leave him with me."

Wattle was not the butler to fall foul of his mistress-elect. He bowed stiffly and crossed the hall, with a sniff at the inferior suitcase which the intruder had deposited on one of his lordship's most approved wolfskins.

The stranger stood like a statue three paces without the ball-room. He was dusty. The hand which held the broad check cap was stained with the road. His eyes, which had been staring with blank amazement at the scene before him, turned wildly on Mrs. Tavistock, as though she had stepped out of a fairy tale.

"Somehow I guess that you must be Mr. Dipper," she said.

"I guess I am," was the reply.

"What made you come here?"

"Now, that's strange," said Dipper. "I was supposing you'd need to know what kept me away, madam."

"You cannot stay here now. You must go quickly. I'll come outside with you and explain."

Mr. Dipper's forehead was furrowed with disappointed surprise.

"But say, madam, I'm late I know it. I met with every kind of trouble on that road—cows and gasoline and cops and everything. But I'm not so late that I can't appear. I need only to change. There's my wife in there, all ready and—madam, what in h—— what holy manner of stuff is that which she's handing out to them?"

"Come away—you must come away. I'll explain."

Dipper moved one pace reluctantly. His eyes still dwelt in horrified fascination on the scene in the ball-room.

"Gee!" he murmured.

He had reason to be surprised. There was Pauline in full rig, dancing as though she had been dancing the whole evening with never a thought for him, but dancing alone. Her arms were postured, just as

if she were engaged with some partner, and her husband could recognize in her steps traces of some of his own recent innovations—the “Cocktail Slide” and the “Clam Razzle.” These were not being executed for the benefit of the audience but were aimed solely at a big, perspiring gink in a suit like a quick-change waiter’s at a down-town ham-and-beef parlour, with—holy Moses!—a sword; who was shuffling around after her like a bear on a bee-nest.

“Gee!” said Hank.

A flame of resentment flushed his sunken cheek. To what indignity had Pauline yielded herself in atonement for his failure? He saw the crowd of eager spectators laughing as children laugh at the antics of a monkey. His eye caught the furtive expression of Mr. Harris, leering as it followed Pauline’s movements. Now she engaged her fatuous partner, patted his cheek, caught him by the arm and drew him into a preposterous, waddling quick-step. The artistic soul of Hank Dipper swelled in indignation. It was barbarous, unseemly. They had taken advantage of his delay to drag Pauline into a heartless caricature of the art which was his pride and profession.

He felt the lady’s hand pulling at his coat-sleeve. He stayed it gently with his own.

“What’s she about? Tell me, madam, if you please, what all this means?”

"She has had to find another partner to dance with of course——"

"Dance! But, say, madam, this stuff is not dancing. My wife is never intended for this foolery. They're doing the very opposite of dancing. They're ridicooling it."

Mrs. Tavistock bit her lip.

"Come," she said. "You must come away now. Your wife wouldn't care to see you standing here."

"Why?" He drew his sleeve politely from her grasp and turned his eyes quickly on her face.

Mrs. Tavistock made impetuous patting motions with the rejected hand. In the ball-room she had a passing vision of Henry in hopeless, stumbling entanglement of feet and sword; of Lord Mellingham, searching the room with a face of surprise and concern.

"Well," she said, "your appearance at the present moment hardly does her credit."

"Gee, nor hers me," said Hank.

Above the clamour within Mrs. Tavistock argued, commanded, implored. He must go and dress before joining his wife. She had behaved splendidly in the emergency; would he embarrass her in the moment of success? But Hank Dipper's chin was thrust out. He answered her courteously but firmly; and he never took his eyes off the Minuet Jazz, now dwindling to its insensate conclusion.

"Madam," he said, "I've no desire to give you trouble but I—I can't stand for this."

It is improbable that the Spirit of the Old-World Dance could have stood for the Minuet Jazz much longer. It had none of the whirling spontaneity of the Esquimaux' Lumber. A feeling of helpless discomfiture hampered his actions throughout—a miserable self-consciousness, loathing, shame. Somehow he muddled on. He saw Pauline's theatrical smile of seduction. To think that he had yielded all his self-respect to that smile but a few hours before! "It will be a bit of fun," she had said. Fun! The thought had brought him to a standstill. He recollected himself and pirouetted heavily. The audience laughed—laughed!

It ended—as it had proceeded—somehow. He knew it was a dismal failure. The clapping and calls which resounded from the ball-room, as, still in difficulties with his sword, he followed Pauline out, were all sham, all mockery. If this thing had been acceptable, Heaven knew, they would swallow anything.

He blundered into Pauline where she had halted. "Hank!" he heard her exclaim. Her voice was strange. He looked up sharply and the dress clothes seemed to grow suddenly bigger—overwhelming. He turned to the ball-room as though in flight. Lord

Mellingham was elbowing his apologetic way towards the door.

"This is a nice thing you've done," said Pauline.

"What's this stuff you've been doing, anyway?" said her husband.

She was stepping back from him as they spoke, led gently by an intervening hand.

"Please go to your room," said Mrs. Tavistock. "I'll see to everything. He shall come up to you."

"But I must speak to him—I must——"

"You shall; but we cannot have a scene here. Do what I ask you. He shall come up to you."

"You promise?"

"Yes, yes. Leave it to me."

"I'll see you upstairs," said Pauline.

"You bet," said Dipper. "I got to get wise to this."

Some unfamiliar instinct in Talboyes inspired him to gain time by taking a call. By the time Lord Mellingham gained the hall Pauline had turned the bend of the stairs.

"Bless my soul!" cried his lordship. "What have we here? No bad news, I trust?"

Mrs. Tavistock was ushering the protesting Dipper into the study.

"Wait there, wait. You shall be attended to."

"Sure, madam, but——"

"Hush. Please do as you are asked."

"I want to see my wife."

"Very well. Wait there."

He shrugged long-suffering shoulders and complied. She closed the door.

"Pray, Mrs. Tavistock, enlighten me. What——"

"Lord Mellingham." She motioned him towards her. Already a dozen curious guests had collected in the background. "I tried to tell you before supper, but you started talking about something else. The man in there has come after Mrs. Dipper. He follows her about wherever she goes. He is her first husband. He, too, is a dancer. He is swayed by jealousy. I have heard all about him from her. She has been half-expecting to see him all the evening."

Lord Mellingham's face assumed a look of stern amazement.

"He has actually dared to invade——"

"Yes, but don't deal too harshly with him. I don't think he quite knows what he is doing. I have sent his wife upstairs."

His lordship turned towards the study door with the attitude of a man contemplating physical exertion.

"No, no," she continued in her confidential whisper. "Deal gently with him. He is a pitiable creature."

"Pitiable?" echoed his lordship. "Is the man insane?"

"His wife didn't say so, but——"

"His wife?"

"His former wife. But he seems strange and unhinged. Deal gently with him."

His lordship sniffed the air ominously.

"Yes, dear lady, but all this is very unfortunate in the midst of my——" He broke off and turned to the doorway. "Dear friends, pray—I am detained a moment—proceed, proceed, I beg."

A few of the more tactful guests withdrew. Their vacancies were filled immediately.

Lord Mellingham's eye rested on Talboyes, who stood on the edge of the throng, a breathless, disconsolate figure.

"Come, come," said his lordship. "You, sir, kindly explain this phenomenal affair."

Talboyes shifted a step forward. He appeared bewildered rather than intimidated.

"It's really what—what she—what Mrs. Tavistock has just told you. You see, this man—Dipper——"

"Dipper? But you are Dipper."

"Ah, yes," said Talboyes. "But, you see, it's not really my name——"

"Not—your—name?"

"Not really. That is to say, it is in a way. It's a pneumos—pseumon—*nom de*—alias thing."

"Come, sir. Oblige me by answering my questions in a proper manner. I wish to obtain a definite

comprehension of these egregious circumstances. Pull yourself together, sir. Remove your sword."

Talboyes cast a quick glance of mute appeal at Mrs. Tavistock.

"I assumed the name," he said.

Imperceptibly she seemed to convey assent.

"But you are the man who goes by the name of Dipper, are you not?"

"Oh, yes," said Talboyes, brightening. "Yes, I'm the man who goes by the name of Dipper."

"And this man?"

"Well, his—his name's Dipper too. He was the—the first Dipper, so to speak."

"Are you related?" inquired his lordship, becoming more and more amazed and emphatic.

"No," replied Talboyes. "I—I don't think so; except, of course, we've both had the same wife. I don't know whether that——"

Lord Mellingham gave a great heave of impatience.

"Oh, my friends," he said, turning once to the doorway, "I pray you resume. Order the band to play. Harris, draw the curtain, I beg."

Inspired by a happy idea, Talboyes resumed suddenly:

"You see, the lord is, my point—my point, my lord—this, my p—— my lord, is my point. Mrs.

Dipper—my wife was well-known by the name of Mrs. Dipper when I m—— met her first; so, you see, I took the name and—carried on with her, as it were, so as not to go and sort of ruin her reputation, if you understand what I mean by that.”

“Sir,” said his lordship sternly. “I am not moved by the smallest desire to plump the incongruities of your domestic career. From your disordered statement I gather that you assumed the name of Dipper as a matter of professional opportunism. Such intelligence leaves me cold. What I desire to know, sir, is why you permit this man to shadow you unbidden beneath my very roof?”

“How can I help it?” cried Talboyes with animation. “I’m not his keeper, my dear sir—my dear l—— my lord.”

Lord Mellingham’s eyes grew wilder.

“His keeper?” he repeated half-heartedly.

“Yes. I’m very sorry you’ve—you’ve got him like this. I didn’t want him here. He’s the last person I wanted to see.”

“But is it his practice to dog you in this monstrous fashion?”

“Yes,” said Talboyes, gaining confidence, “it is. That is to say, wherever Mrs. Dipper goes he generally tries to—to—to dog.”

As he uttered the words the study door opened slowly. The guests jostled and craned. Lord Mell-

ingham drew himself up to his full height—but took two paces to the rear.

"Gently, gently," whispered Mrs. Tavistock.

Hank shambled awkwardly into the hall. His face was working with a thoughtful chewing motion. He scanned the faces around him with scared eyes, which finally fastened on the commanding figure of the host.

"Say, Lord," he began. "I seem to have caused some shimozzle here. I regret it. I didn't mean harm. I know it's a bit late to show up, but, now I am here, if I can put things to rights——"

"Gently," whispered Mrs. Tavistock.

"The only means by which you can do so," said Lord Mellingham, "is to leave this house quietly, and at once."

"Say, that's a bit tough, ain't it?" said Dipper, "I guess I don't deserve any nosegays, but can't I stop and show you my dancing?"

"No, sir," replied his lordship. "I have not the faintest desire to witness your dancing. You must begone, my good fellow, and at once."

Dipper jerked his long chin with an injured air.

"And what about my wife?" he inquired more sharply.

"Now I refuse to be drawn into discussion of any sort. Do what I order without any further prevarication."

Dipper turned and took stock of Talboyes with a slow nod. Then he again eyed the massive, twitching face of the peer.

"Say, Lord," he exclaimed passionately. "Do you people know real dancing when you see it? Are you a married man, I ask you? Would you stand to see your wife performing unworthy of herself?"

Lord Mellingham hesitated. Suddenly a retrospective gleam of enthusiasm shone forth upon his countenance. Instinctively he grasped the lapels of his coat.

"While holding myself under no obligation to satisfy your curiosity," he declared, "I may inform you that the answer to the first part of your question is in the affirmative; to the second in the negative. The third, therefore, does not arise."

A murmur of approbation ran through the ranks of the guests.

Dipper was frankly puzzled. He had a faint suspicion that he was being made an object of ridicule. He returned to the charge with less assurance.

"I saw her," he said with smouldering indignation in his voice, "in there with this—person. As to what he thought he was doing with her, search me. If you want to see dancing done——"

"Purely professional jealousy!" remarked Talboyes, scratching his chin unconcernedly.

"Jealousy!" cried Dipper. "Say, the lady's my wife and——"

"Now, sir," said Lord Mellingham with sudden energy, "enough of you. You must go."

"Well, let me see my wife and I'll quit."

Talboyes glanced at Lord Mellingham unsteadily. The peer's eye was upon him. Talboyes smiled in magnanimous scorn.

"Pooh, pooh," he said.

"No, sir," said his lordship with finality, "I refuse to allow you to remain here. The lady to whom you refer has evidently no desire to entertain your advances. She has fled from your face."

"I'll quit," repeated Hank. "I've no wish to remain. But my wife is here, up those stairs, and I only ask to see her."

He advanced towards the staircase and paused, indicating Mrs. Tavistock.

"It was that lady who sent her upstairs and——"

Lord Mellingham was upon him, a mountain of wrath.

"Away, go away," he burst forth. "I am fully aware of all your claims and motives. I refuse to allow you to remain one instant longer. Your unwarrantable trespass has been treated with too great a leniency. You have had the audacity to pester my premises in the midst of a private social gathering without justification or apology. Away with you—"

delay another moment and you shall be flung out—flung! Away, and off my premises, or you will repent it.”

Hank Dipper shrank from the vast, purple countenance with a dismal frown of perplexity.

“But, say——”

“Go. Go. Away!”

“Well, can you beat this?” said Dipper mournfully.

The question was unanswered. Talboyes stood with a set face. Mrs. Tavistock’s head was lowered.

“Out, out!” cried his lordship. “Not another word. You dare to come stealing into my private house at two in the morning! Is that article part of your belongings?” The great forefinger quivered in the direction of the wolfskin.

“Sure, that’s my bag, Lord. I——”

“Then remove it and begone. You dare to come here, outraging the privacy of my establishment and putting down your bags in my Armorial Hall! Out—go out!”

Talboyes found himself alone in the study. He sank upon the Chesterfield. He was only sub-consciously aware of extreme bodily weariness. He rested his head upon his hands and tried to regulate the riot of his mind. What now? Was this a new lease for his deplorable intrigue? How long was it

to continue? He thought of the baffled, dishonoured Dipper. He was genuinely sorry for the fell injustice he had witnessed. Some perversity of hope, an echo of remorse perhaps, prompted Talboyes to wish that when the inevitable disclosure came the old lord would turn and rend him in like manner. A little chuckle of nervous laughter fluttered in his throat at the very thought of that devastating figure.

Presently Wattle came in and said something—something half reproachful about the terrible scandal, his lordship's lamentable upset, and why hadn't he himself been allowed a hint of warning. Talboyes's only response was to crave the favour of a whisky and soda.

Wattle left the study door ajar. To the troubled brain of Henry Talboyes, as he sat dejectedly on that Chesterfield, the Armorial Hall seemed to reverberate with eager snatches of some diabolical, mocking chanty:

"The Dippers—yes, but which of the Dippers?" "What, another of the Dippers?" "How many Dippers are there then?" "Was he talking to the Dippers?" "Oh, another of the Dippers?" "Then, which of the Dippers?" "Another Dipper," "An extra Dipper," "A dud Dipper," "Which is the proper Dipper?" "What is all the scandal about the Dippers?" "Dippers—the Dippers—the Dippers—the Dippers—the Dippers——"

Talboyes closed the door gently, turned and apostrophized the ceiling.

"Oh, cursèd night!" he cried.

CHAPTER XI

TALBOYES got his whisky and soda. He mixed it himself and felt better—less rattled. He remained in isolation upon the Chesterfield. Nobody came. What was there familiar in that sensation of sitting and waiting gloomily for something unpleasant to happen? Ah, he remembered what the association was—the cow-shed at the station that evening. Would that he had never quitted it; he was a thousand times better off in the cow-shed. His vigil would have been nearly over. What was that early train? Three-fifteen, Milk and Workmen—he remembered the hour distinctly. It had made an impression on him at the time. He recalled having congratulated himself on not being a workman.

Three-fifteen! He glanced up at the heavy study clock. Suddenly with staring eyes he sat bolt upright. He brought his hands down upon his knees with a loud smack of decision. He would flee.

Yes, he would flee while there was yet time. He would shake off this misery at all costs. His clothes were in the old lord's room. He would go up and

change. He must let Stella know—he could manage that somehow. She would get along better without him. If he attempted to partake in the general explanations which must ensue, he would only involve matters and infuriate the harassed peer. He could steal out of the house somehow. If Hank had strolled in and watched the dancing in that cool manner, surely to goodness anybody could sneak out! Once outside he would be safe. Nobody here would have heard of the three-fifteen. What did the old lord know of milk, or his guests of workmen?

Talboyes left the study. In a corner of the Armorial Hall Mrs. Duckingham-Leape was addressing a small but representative body of local newsmongers. There was an eloquent hush as he passed them. He was conscious of eyes piercing the small of his back as he mounted the first flight of stairs. They no longer worried him. He felt strangely elated.

Which was the dressing-room? He must not be observed now. He stole down the passage prying stealthily around him. He came to a dead standstill and stared before him, incredulous. His bag! To be sure, he had forgotten his bag; he had left it in that calamitous Old Bedroom. But the gods were undoubtedly with him. They had deposited both the bag and a grey felt hat on the landing outside. True, the bag was lying disconsolately on its beam ends with Starchfield memoranda strewn around it;

but here, at any rate, were his indispensable belongings delivered without a word into his hands.

He approached silently and began to gather up the papers. He paused. What voice was that resounding in heated altercation from the bedroom? Talboyes inclined his ear to the door and listened. Great Scot! The man had come back. Undaunted, Hank had returned to the house and found his way upstairs. The bag and hat had, no doubt, left the Old Bedroom shortly after he had entered it.

This settled the matter—flight, flight! Talboyes collected the papers with redoubled haste, and, placing the hat on his head, carried the bag with both hands to the old lord's dressing-room.

He entered cautiously and switched on the light. Was this the room? Yes, but where were his clothes? He gazed anxiously round on all sides. Where were those clothes? This was that old fool butler's doing. He placed the bag carefully on the floor and began to hunt. The room contained a multitude of garments—yards and yards of the very best trousers in presses, massive coats, swinging like black bogies from silver-mounted hooks; but never a sign of Talboyes' honest but less imposing attire. Here was a set-back!

"Oh, Mr. Talboyes!"

Talboyes gave a great gulp and dived out from a curtained gallery of coats. In the doorway stood a

young woman—a servant evidently—whose face seemed to be a remote portion of the dim, respectable past.

“How are you and who do you know my name?”

“I am very well, thank you, sir, and——”

“No, no. Who are you and how?”

“Oh, sir, I understood you to say ‘how are you and who’——”

“Well, never mind. I’m glad you’re all right. Now, who are you?”

“Me name is Minnie.”

“Minnie?”

“Yes, sir—late of Miss Starchfield’s.”

“Good heavens!”

“But, oh, sir, I haven’t spoken to a soul of you. I see you when you first arrive. I see you go to the Old Bedroom with the dancing lady and I spoke to Mrs. Tavistock and she tells me of your double life and I’m not to say a word.”

Talboyes passed his hand across his brow, knocking the hat to a rakish angle on the back of his head.

“Where are my clothes? Do you know that?” he asked appealingly.

“Oh, sir, they are in Mrs. Tavistock’s room.”

“Why?”

“Oh, because it happened in this way——”

“No, no, never mind. I don’t want to know why. Where is the room?”

"Just along here, sir."

"Lead the way, Millie."

"Oh, sir, 'Minnie'."

"Minnie. Lead the way."

The sanctuary was gained without mishap. Talboyes' clothes lay folded on a chair. He rubbed his hands.

"Good! We progress," he said. "Now, Millie, I want you to get something done for me."

"Oh, sir—if I can. It's 'Minnie,' sir."

"Yes, I am sure you can."

"Oh, sir, what is it?"

"I'm just going to tell you. Don't interrupt now. Time is pressing."

"I beg your pardon, sir."

"All right. Now this is what I want you to do, Millie."

"Min—yes, sir."

"Oh, don't talk. You waste time. I want to get my clothes changed and——"

"Oh, sir, what do you want me to do. I don't think I ought to——"

"Quiet please, please quiet! This is what I want you to do. I want you to go downstairs and get round a footman——"

"Round a footman? Oh——"

"Yes, yes, and tell him to tell Mrs. Tavistock that she's wanted up here."

"Herē, sir?"

"Yes, here, girl. Where do you—no! Look here. Tell the footman to tell Mrs. Tavistock that you want to tell her something. And then you tell her that I'm here and told you to go and tell her. Now, you can't make any mistake. So go on and do that, will you? You see, I'm in a great hurry."

"Oh, sir, I am to tell Mrs. Tavistock that you are here."

"Yes, yes," cried Talboyes, struggling out of Lord Mellingham's coat. "And, look here!" he added, as Minnie was retreating. "For goodness' sake, don't you go and tell anybody anything about this."

"Oh, I won't, sir. Except Mrs. Tavistock, that is."

Talboyes controlled himself with a supreme effort.

"Good girl," he said. "Good girl! That's right. Good girl!"

If Minnie was slow, she was sure. Two minutes later William singled out Mrs. Tavistock from the ball-room doorway. She had been dancing with Peter Dollery and was now engaging him in delightful conversation at the side of the room.

Mrs. Tavistock had watched Lord Mellingham return, flushed and snorting, to the ball-room from the eviction of Hank. So formidable had been his aspect that the accumulated guests had parted with-

out hesitation to make way for him; only to reassemble, like quicksilver, into busy little gossiping groups. He had marched past them, vainly endeavouring to compose his features into a normal beam. In passing he had rallied the band sharply: "Play! Come, play you up!"

They played. Mrs. Tavistock disengaged herself from the chattering throng in the doorway and took the floor with Peter. More than once she had caught the sound of her own name in the excited whispers around her. Whatever her next move in this wild game might be, it was clear that her first was to assume complete unconcern in the Dipper contretemps.

She danced with an easy, practised step; her thoughts were busy elsewhere. She had made vows which must not be broken. The embittered, outlawed Hank prowled in the drive. Pauline, expectant and impatient, lingered still in the Old Bedroom. What fevered indiscretion might not emanate at any moment from the study? Reason pointed unsparingly to the conservatory, whither his lordship had repaired to cool his agitated brow; but who could listen to Reason at this stage?

William delivered an unemotional but hazy statement concerning a request from Mrs. Tavistock's maid at the bend of the staircase. Appalling possibilities presented themselves to the widow's mind. She left Peter with a half-expressed apology. He

watched her retreating figure with a slow look of perturbation and growing curiosity. More trouble, no doubt, with these eternal Dippers! But why should Mrs. Tavistock be again involved? It was queer. Peter meditated with a deepening frown. Then he turned impulsively towards the conservatory.

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"Henry! What are you about?"

"I am about to bolt," said Talboyes.

He was nearly dressed. Lord Mellingham's second best coat and trousers lay on the floor. Mrs. Tavistock's soft inquiring eyes searched the strained face of a man who is putting on a collar against time.

"To bolt? How?"

"By train. Three-fifteen—Milk and Workmen—from Mellingham station."

"But Henry dear!"

"Don't try and dissuade me, Stella; I must go. I can't face another moment of this. I simply sent for you to tell you. That man is back—the husband—Dipper. He is in the Old Bedroom with his wife."

Mrs. Tavistock looked up sharply.

"Hank is?"

Talboyes nodded. There is something about the fastening of a bow tie which precludes speech.

"How did he get there?"

"I don't care—know, I mean. I don't care if it comes to that."

Mrs. Tavistock advanced a step. She tapped her forehead, trying to concentrate her thoughts, as he was trying to button his waistcoat—against time.

"I suppose the wife waited on the landing and overheard all that, or part of it," she suggested.

"I should think she heard the last part if she were in the lodge," said Talboyes.

"Catch her going to her room! Then she must have run out and got him in somehow. Oh, my stars, Henry! What a mix-up!"

Talboyes paused in his toilet and regarded her with penitence.

"I'm not being shel—selfish—selfish, am I, Stella? Tell me you don't think I'm selfish," he said earnestly. "You'll clear it up better without me. I should only get muddled—muddled. You can tell the old lord. He'll take it from you."

She nodded disconsolately.

"Yes, but why will he take it from me? That's the point. Besides why should I tell him?"

"Stella?"

"I can't help saying I think you are doing yourself best in the matter, dear Henry."

"Oh, Stella, don't say that. Just when I've got one boot on. All right then, I'll take it off again."

Mrs. Tavistock watched him for a moment in silence. She was alert as though listening.

"No," she said quickly. "Put it on again. Henry, I am coming with you."

He tossed his remaining boot into the air and caught it.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed. "But you'll have to hurry up. Oh, this is great! But what about your clothes? You can't travel by the Milk and Workmen in that get-up."

"I only want a hat and cloak."

"Right! Oh, this is magnificent. After all, why should you stay and face all the horrible indignity from this great rich, loathsome place?"

Mrs. Tavistock hesitated. Her eyes were bright with excitement.

"I've a good mind to do it," she said.

"Do it? Rather. I'm doing it," said Talboyes.

"My luggage, though. How could we manage——"

Talboyes' enthusiasm was momentarily damped.

"Oh, we can't take it. You must leave it."

"Helen, of course!" she cried with a snap of the fingers. "She can bring them to-morrow. I'll go and tell her."

"Tell who? I say, look out what you're doing, Stella."

"It's all right. I won't be long. What time did you say the train was?"

"Three-fifteen. We shall have to look sharp. It's the dickens of a way to the station."

"Three-fifteen? Oh, there's plenty of time. You finish dressing and wait here. I'll be back in a moment."

She crossed quickly to the door.

"Oh, Henry!" She halted. "Do you realise what we are doing? Can we do it?"

"I'm going to do it, if I have to jump out of the window," he said. "I can do anything to leave this place behind me."

She glanced back at him, nodded eagerly and was gone.

Lord Mellingham's agitated brow was cooler. Peter found him in a basket chair in the conservatory in the company of Mr. Harris, who had evidently been prescribing for him.

"Look here, uncle," said Peter. "Do you know that Mrs. Tavistock has just been sent for again from upstairs? It's those everlasting Dipper people. Why they should be allowed to pester her life out I can't see."

Lord Mellingham drew himself slowly upright in his chair.

"They take advantage of her kindness," pursued

Peter. "And what about all this scandalous row in the middle of your dance. She was sort of lugged into that. It's monstrous."

His lordship frowned deeply.

"I tell you," said Peter, "there's something pretty dicky about that Dipper business."

"Yes, I think so too," said Mr. Harris.

"I have experienced sufficient annoyance from that quarter," said Lord Mellingham. "I refuse definitely to attempt any supervision of the ordering of a *ménage* which appears to be little short of grossly immoral. Your complaint with regard to Mrs. Tavistock is of a different nature." He arose with grim determination. "Follow me to my study," he said.

"Ah, the man is no longer here," continued his lordship, as the three entered the study. "No doubt he, too, has gone upstairs to his wife."

"To his wife?" echoed Peter. "Do you know, uncle, I believe that is all an absolute yarn. I believe the man you bunged out was the genuine Dipper. He looked it. This fat chap who's been dancing hasn't the faintest resemblance to the ordinary run of professional."

"Now," seconded Mr. Harris.

"But," objected the peer, "Mrs. Tavistock has ascertained——"

"Mrs. Tavistock has been duped," cried Peter.

"They've got hold of her and sprung some piteous yarn which, in the kindness of her heart, she has believed and repeated. Besides, as I say, this man doesn't look like a dancer. I thought so the moment I saw him. Look at his manner and the way he talks and everything. He's not a Yank; the bunged-out Dipper was a Yank."

"Oh, cannot you broach your argument in Anglo-Saxon, boy?"

"My point is, uncle, that this man is not a professional dancer at all. He seemed to me in every way to be more like an ordinary—well, an ordinary gentleman."

"Gentleman?" cried his lordship in horror, "are you intoxicated, young man?"

"Ow, don't be an ass, Peter," said Mr. Harris.

"Moreover," continued Lord Mellingham, "the man you suspect has been dancing to admiration. All my guests are delighted with his display."

"He didn't dance at all," said Peter. "He simply played the ass. You could have done what he did."

"You infer that he is not Dipper?"

"Exactly. I think he knew Dipper was going to be late, so came to take his place by arrangement with the wife. Why should they have troubled Mrs. Tavistock with all their inner history? It's obvious."

Lord Mellingham gasped.

"What is your opinion, Harris?" he murmured:

Mr. Harris brooded over the problem, stroking his moustache.

"Any 'ow," he said, "'e can be identified, can't 'e? What about the band? The band 'll know who's Dipper and who's not Dipper."

"Go," said Lord Mellingham to his nephew, "and bring that band conductor to me. I will adopt your test, Harris."

Peter left the room—keen on his quarry.

"The suggestion that Mrs. Tavistock has been victimized in the face of the entire neighbourhood fills me with disquiet, Harris," murmured the peer.

The leading negro was ushered in. He stood and regarded his patron with a broad grin, which by no means mollified that fermenting personage.

"Come, sir," said his lordship. "I am engaged upon a delicate investigation. Tell me without waste of words—did you enjoy a previous acquaintance with this man Dipper?"

The negro did not hesitate. Dipper had proved a success that evening. It was practically a duty to be on terms of lifelong friendship with all the biggest noises of the dance hall.

"Sure," said the negro.

"He means 'yes,'" said Peter.

"Sure I mean yep," said the negro.

"For how long a space of time have you known him?" asked his lordship, frowning.

"Oo, gee—some while," said the negro.

Lord Mellingham smote his desk.

"Kindly refrain, sir, from expressing yourself in the phraseology of the jungle," he cried. "You have known this person Dipper, the man who has been performing here to-night, personally for a period of years? Am I correct?"

"You bet," said the negro, fidgeting.

"There you are," put in Mr. Harris. "He can identify 'im."

"Are you sure he is Dipper?" asked Peter eagerly.

"Why surely," said the negro. "Gee, yes, Dipper—why, surely. Why, you bet yer."

"Oh, withdraw," said his lordship testily. "Enough! Go. You nauseate me."

"I don't care," said Peter, as the negro willingly departed. "That great lout isn't worth a button to anyone. I still stick to my opinion that there's something wrong about the Dippers. What are they trying to get Mrs. Tavistock to do for them now? If you don't go and see, uncle, I will."

"Contain yourself, Peter. That witness, however repellent, entirely confuted your theory. We have no certainty that Mrs. Tavistock is with the Dippers at this moment. She is, quite possibly, in her own room."

"Well, why not get hold of her, uncle, and find out all she knows about these beastly people?"

Lord Mellingham groaned faintly.

"I have been endeavouring to 'get hold of her' as you express it the whole evening," he said. "Wait. I will ascertain whether she is in her room."

He stalked across to his private telephone switch-board.

Talboyes leapt. The silence of the bedroom was broken by the sudden buzzing challenge of a devilish mechanical sentry. He grabbed the receiver and silenced the threatening sound; but he gathered his wits just in time to prevent himself uttering the instinctive "Hallo." Next moment he was hovering in hopeless indecision, receiver to ear. He placed the palm of his unoccupied hand over the mouth-piece—he knew not why. Then he laid the receiver gingerly on the table. Indefinite rumblings still seemed to vibrate within it. He could almost detect in them the repetition of the words he had heard: "Ah, dear lady, you are there? Ah, so you are there, dear lady?"

"She is there," said Lord Mellingham, turning in triumph to his nephew. "She does not reply, but she is there. She has removed her receiver."

"That's queer," said Peter. "You'd better go and see what it means."

"Go to her private room, boy?"

"Certainly. She seems to want to answer but doesn't. There must be something wrong. Dipper

may be strangling her. Anyhow, seriously, uncle, if you won't go and see what's up, I'll go myself."

"Control yourself," said his lordship. "I will go."

"Shall I come too?"

"Certainly not. Remain here—and you also, Harris, I pray. I will return and report what is afoot."

Talboyes leapt again, hesitated, but made no reply to the rather timid rap at the bedroom door. It might only be that maid—Millie, or whatever her name was. It might be——

"Dear lady? Are you within?"

With a flash of inspiration Talboyes kicked the visitor's coat and trousers under the bed. He shot a quick glance at the door of the bathroom, opened it and fled within. With a second flash of inspiration he made a furious attack on the various contrivances of the bath. He turned taps indiscriminately. Water burst forth from unsuspected sources. A brief but terrific downpour from the shower missed his head by inches. He lunged at the control levers and, from a latent perforation beneath, the "tornado" spent its hissing volume against the opposite wall. The shower still dripped plaintively. The "wave," the "swash," the "plunge," the "gurge," each in turn exhibited its startling properties to the splashed and baffled investigator; while his boots began to glow

with the subtle calefaction of the electric bath-mat.

Above the rush of waters he seemed to gain some vague impression of apologetic withdrawal from the bedroom. It was some time, however, before he could turn the water off effectively. It ceased to "surf" only to rush with redoubled vigour from the "gurge." To the very last the shower continued to operate with sudden gushes and a horrid, moaning whistle. At length Talboyes peered cautiously round the bathroom door. The bedroom was unoccupied.

His first move was to Mrs. Tavistock's towel-horse. That lady, returning anon, discovered him seated on the bed rubbing his ears.

"We've missed that train," he moaned. "More frightfulness has occurred. The old lord has been up. I had to pretend you were having a bath."

"Did he see you," she asked with anxiety.

"See me? I should hope not."

"You didn't speak?"

"Speak? No. It wouldn't have mattered. I could safely have sung in that Niagara of a place. Are you ready? We must go."

"I've got to pack after all," said Mrs. Tavistock. "Come on; help me."

"Pack? But my dear Stella——"

"Yes, I couldn't speak to Helen. She had got a man named Pink into the conservatory. I couldn't ruin poor Helen's one chance."

Mrs. Tavistock was already on her knees in the corner of the room, where her small portmanteau and dressing-case lay.

"But this is madness," cried Talboyes desperately. "Who is Helen? What is all this? How can we possibly take your boxes? How can we possibly catch the train in any case?"

"Don't talk, Henry dear. Pack, pack. I'll pack. You hand me the things. Those things out of the wardrobe first."

"But Stella, this is madness."

"We shall have to get a car, that's all."

"A car, yes. But how on earth can we get a car?" asked Talboyes, enveloped in flowing robes from the wardrobe.

"Pack, dear. Put them all down here beside me. There are plenty of cars outside."

"But we can't go rousing suspicion like that. Besides, how can we take somebody else's car?"

"Just to the station? Why not?"

"Well, I don't know if it comes to that," replied Talboyes. "What about this chest of drawers?"

We must catch the train somehow. If we could get a car without having to stop and bargain for it so much the better. Hand me all those things off the dressing-table. Henry, Mr. Dipper has got a car."

"Yes? But——"

"Come along, pack, pack! Oh, don't drop the hairbrushes, dear."

"Do you suggest that we use Dipper's car?"

"Yes. Now the chest of drawers. We've done a great deal for the Dippers between us. I'm sure they wouldn't grudge us a little favour. Try and bring all those things in one handful."

"But who the dickens is to drive it?"

"I think it's only a two-seater. You can drive quite well. All my shoes are in that little cupboard thing."

Talboyes pulled a drawer completely out of its seating.

"Yes, I can drive after a fashion," he said.

"You drive very nicely I always think," said Mrs. Tavistock. "We must get away somehow—that's obvious. It's no good half doing a thing. It's against my principles. If we've made up our minds to a thing, do let us do it thoroughly. Boots!"

"But what do we do with the car when we get to the station?"

"Well, we can't drive it back, can we?"

"Can we leave it there?"

"What else can we do? Leave that cloak, I'm going to wear it. Ah, we're getting on. But if we don't take his car to the station I think we may miss the train."

"I'm not going to miss that train," said Talboyes.

"Then there's nothing else for it," said Mrs Tavistock.

"But how can we let him know? By Jove, Stella, this is not a bad idea. We can catch the train quite comfortably in a car if we hurry like mad. The station's no distance. But how can we let him know?"

"Have you left anything in the wardrobe? Stick all those things in my sponge-bag, there's a dear. We could leave him a note, couldn't we?"

"A note? Do I put these teethbrush—tooth-brushes——?"

"Yes, all in the sponge-bag will do. Yes, a note—'Mr. Dipper's car is at the station'—and leave it here behind us."

"Yes. Good idea, Stella. After all, it would be the polite thing to do."

"Write it now, while I finish off the packing."

"What on?"

"Oh, Henry dear! On a piece of paper. Are you sure you emptied the boot-cupboard?"

"I haven't got a piece of paper."

"Tear a bit out of the lining of one of the drawers."

"I haven't got a pencil."

"You've got a fountain pen. I gave it to you."

"Oh yes."

Kneeling in the corner, Mrs. Tavistock put the finishing touches to her packing with record deftness and rapidity. As she locked her dressing-case she looked up keenly.

"Finished, Henry?"

"No," was the reply. "No, it was a kind thought but I'm afraid we shan't be able to do it."

She rose and joined him. The drawer-paper was decorated in several places with the dual impressions of a dry nib.

"Oh, dear," she said. "This was rather a necessary part of the programme. Shake the thing, dear Henry."

"I have been shaking till all is blue—or rather isn't blue. I do hate these infernal pens. Of course, this one you gave me is a beauty really, but——"

"Hurrah!" she interrupted. "Ink!" A gigantic blot had fallen on the middle of the paper.

"It still won't write," said Talboyes.

"Use the blot as a reservoir of course," she directed. "Dear Henry, why can't you use a fountain pen like everybody else does?"

The task was completed. Mrs. Tavistock left the announcement, together with largess for Minnie upon her dressing-table.

"Now we've got to get all these things downstairs without being seen," she said.

"We can't," said Talboyes.

"We must. You take my two things. I'll bring your bag."

"Stella, you must be awfully careful of that bag. It's weak at the harsp."

"At the what, dear?"

"Oh, the clip thing that clips it. Hold it with both hands."

"All right. You go first, Henry. Creep! And when you come to the bend of the staircase wait and choose a moment when there's no one walking about the Armorial Hall. I'll follow and meet you outside. Creep, Henry!"

Talboyes took a firm hold of an article of luggage in each hand, gazed at her with fond intensity for one moment, girded up his loins and crept.

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Lord Mellingham found the study unoccupied on his return from Mrs. Tavistock's bedchamber. Peter and Harris had failed to keep their tryst. Dancing had proved too strong a counter-attraction for Peter. At length, however, both his lordship's counsellors put in an appearance.

"You were wrong, boy," said the peer. "Mrs. Tavistock was not with the Dippers at all. She has, in point of fact, retired."

"Oh, rot!" said Peter.

"Sir!"

"She wouldn't have crept off to bed like that, as if there was some deadly secret about it," argued Peter.

"She has retired, I repeat," said his lordship. "I have satisfied myself on that score."

Peter frowned across thoughtfully at Mr. Harris.

"Did you go along to the Dippers?" asked Peter.

"No, I did not," replied his lordship shortly.

"What are you going to do about it now?"

"Will you kindly abstain from this querulous and mandatory attitude?"

"But, look here, uncle, aren't you going to have them down again? They've only done two piffling turns. Have them down again and tell them that this time they are not to footle about like that but to give us a proper ball-room stunt. Then we can watch the man and judge for ourselves whether he has any pretensions to being a *pukka* dancer. Harris and I can soon tell you that, and it will decide the whole business once and for all."

"Good egg!" said Mr. Harris. "Do that, old boy. That'll clinch it one way or the other. And, after all, you 'aven't 'ad your money's worth out of 'em yet."

His lordship groaned with annoyance.

"Oh, I am becoming so cross," he said. "Very well. Let us conclude this vexatious matter in the way you suggest."

He manipulated the stoppers of his switchboard with the pugnacity of exasperation.

"That is Mrs. Dipper, is it not? It is Lord Mellingham who is speaking to you."

"Oh, dear! Yes?" replied the arch tones of Pauline.

"Is your husband with you?"

"Er—yes. At least—which husband?"

Lord Mellingham snorted.

"Your legal husband, madam."

"Yes. He's here now. I went and fetched him up."

"Ah. You have not yet completed your obligations to me."

"Oh, dear! What have I done now?"

"I desire you and your husband to descend and dance——"

"Oh, then I'm forgiven?"

"Yes, yes. I do not wish to refer again to a most regrettable and unfortunate episode."

"But you heard the truth about it?"

"I did. I have no wish to discuss the matter further."

"Oh, good thing you don't take it more to heart. They explained it all to you, did they?"

"Yes. The subject is closed. You and your husband will kindly——"

"Oh, but please tell me what happened to the other man? Where is he now?"

"I drove him away, madam. Do you suppose that I permitted such an outrage to go unheeded?"

A sharp laugh was Pauline's comment.

"Rather bad luck on him really, you know?" she added. "He meant well."

"Enough of this," said Lord Mellingham. "You and your husband will kindly descend and dance. On this occasion my guests desire to witness a—a juzz."

"A what?"

"A modern ball-room dance," said his lordship, prompted from the rear of the study. "Does that lie within your powers?" he asked meaningly.

"Well, rather," said Pauline. "You'll get the proper thing this time of course. When do you want us?"

"H'm. Another dance seems to have commenced. Kindly appear in a quarter of an hour's time. And mark what I say. We require a real juzz. Not a pantomimic extravaganza."

Pauline laughed again.

"All right we'll be down at a quarter past three," she said.

"Ah! Three-fifteen. I will make the necessary preparations," said Lord Mellingham, somewhat appeased.

"Come on, Hank," cried Pauline, hanging up the

receiver. "Get busy with those glad rags. The old lord has got wise to everything and he's taken it like a fat angel and we're to go down and give a proper turn. So quit all that pining and get busy, kid."

Lord Mellingham turned with injured severity to his nephew.

"Your romantic theory is completely exploded, boy," he declared.

CHAPTER XII

A CROWD of guests lingered at the ball-room end of the hall, conferring a parting appreciation upon the vehicular refreshment-stand and discussing the eventful evening with speculations so imaginative and engrossing that the cowering, bag-laden figure tiptoed unnoticed from the foot of the stairs into the vestibule. Talboyes could scarce believe his good fortune. Had he escaped? Beyond the open door in front of him stood the trees and terraces of Freedom, faintly outlined in the first gleams of daylight. He glanced fearfully back, skidded for one giddy moment on the tiger-skin, recovered himself with a gasp of suspense and blundered on into the drive.

To his right stood a shadowy array of cars, their eyes glowing wanly in the misty dawn. To his left, in solitary degradation at the edge of the drive, was the battered two-seater of Hank Dipper.

Talboyes advanced towards it at a crouching trot, conscious of the suspicious scrutiny of an idling group of chauffeurs. At the rear of the car was what looked

like a closed cupboard. Holding the dressing-case between his knees, he wrenched the cupboard open. It unfolded itself readily into a dicky-seat. With the clumsiness of haste he raised the portmanteau and the dressing-case into position. Then he turned with a sharp catch of the breath. Mrs. Tavistock, her grey travelling cloak buttoned to the neck and her hat crushed and shrouded beneath a long, white motor veil, stood, hovering stealthily at his side, like some modernized Lady Macbeth clutching her guilty secret in a Gladstone bag.

"Good, Stella!" said Talboyes breathing again. "Get in and hold that bag on your knees if you can. I'll start the car."

She obeyed in silence. He darted round, leant over the wing and operated the switch. Then, with a quick puzzled frown, he examined the steering-wheel and performed indecisive rasping actions with the levers carried on its bevelled edge.

"These things aren't marked," he complained impatiently. "Throttle and spark, I suppose, but Heaven knows where they go."

He looked sharply back in the direction of the front door, then, dodging forward again, stooped and grasped the starting-handle.

Mrs. Tavistock, too, looked back; but the action had none of his fluttering timidity. She was sitting upright, calm. Her eyes surveyed the exterior of

the Hall with lingering approval and rested for the space of a few seconds on the laggard line of cars with a glance of casual unconcern for their dawdling, yawning sentries.

But her attention was speedily restored to the operations of Talboyes.

He was bent double. His eyes were closed in desperate concentration. His teeth were clenched and he was wreaking all the shreds of his spent energies in spasms of bootless swinging.

"Oh, Henry!" she cried. "Don't say you can't do it."

He shook his head and gasped in the midst of his labour.

"Never talk to a man who is doing this," he said.

"But you're not doing it, dear," she said. "Won't you flood the something—whatever it is they do."

He raised a countenance piteous in sweat and anguish.

"It's those infernal things on the thing—I haven't got them right," he said, indicating the steering wheel with a nervous finger. "I wish you'd twiddle them a bit, will you?"

She obeyed with vague raspings.

He bent again to the task.

"Twiddle now—while I—swing," he directed.

There was no result. Talboyes paused for a few

brief seconds, gathered his failing strength with the last struggling desperation of a drowning man, and swung—swung to the limit of endurance. The regular, sucking hiss of stubborn valves alone rewarded him.

Again he paused. The veins of his forehead were throbbing madly. He shook a fearful choking cough from his throat.

“Henry——”

“Oh—don’t, Stella—we must, we must.”

“Then do try flooding the thing inside the front part. I know it’s the right thing to do.”

He released a catch in the bonnet. A sheet of tin came away into his face. He groped within, found the needle, jerked it furiously. Petrol spat forth. He replaced the metal sheet somehow. His actions seemed to him like those of a man on a bed of fever.

“Now swing once more if you can. Our last hope, Henry!”

He gave a dazed nod, bent bravely and swung. The roar of the engine cleft the air. It was racing outrageously. The car shook convulsively in every fibre.

“Twiddle—twiddle the things on the thi—— All right, leave it to me. Thank God, Stella; oh, thank God!”

He clambered over the wing into his seat. Hope

and energy were renewed in that one glorious, life-giving moment. He worked throttle and ignition levers in blind optimism. The engine roared and raced more loudly—subsided—heavens! almost stopped—roared anew. He seized the gear-lever, tugged it. There was a fiendish shriek of tortured steel. He glanced downwards and pushed one foot resolutely into the darkness of the floorboards. With a jerk which dislocated the dressing-case, the car leapt forward a yard, jibbed stiffly and halted. Suddenly, like a barking dog smitten into silence, the engine ceased to run.

“God of Battles!” said Talboyes.

Mrs. Tavistock sat, shaken but fearless, clasping the Gladstone bag. She looked at him quickly. There was no resentment in her face; only an appealing little smile of anxious encouragement.

“Beastly side-break thing—damn—half a moment,” he explained.

He climbed out, ran forward, bent and swung; back to the steering-wheel with rasping experiments; back again to the starting-handle and swung—the valves hissed mockingly.

He drew himself up painfully, choking. He looked up again towards the main entrance of the Hall. From the distance came the echoes of banjos twanging senselessly on, of the trap-drummer rattling at his hackneyed miscellany of targets. To Talboyes’

ears the sound was a war-dance. As he listened, striving to regain his breath, he seemed to hear Lord Mellingham's stentorian call to action, and to catch a vision of the guests pausing wide-eyed in the dance, tearing the blunderbusses from the walls of the Armorial Hall and coursing forth in an excited swarm to the pursuit.

A figure disengaged itself from the little group of waiting chauffeurs and moved towards him. It was almost daylight. At any moment he might be discovered, detained, forced to drag himself and Stella defeated back into chaotic inquisition and indignity. Blindly he stooped and swung.

"Having trouble, 'm?"

Talboyes looked up with startled eyes. That confident, cockney voice had associations of rescue.

"Yes," said Mrs. Tavistock. "We borrowed this car to take us to the station, but——"

"To the station? But—hallo, why it's you, sir, is it?"

"Yes," said Talboyes, "it is."

"You seem a bit in trouble, sir. Can I do anything? What about taking the lady in the big car?"

Talboyes' heart leapt within him.

"Good man!" he cried. "And you can take me too."

"Oh, I thought I was going to take you to town, sir?"

"No, no, no, I'm going by train."

"Oh?" said the chauffeur doubtfully. "What train is that, sir?"

"Why, the Milk and Wor—the—the three-fifteen from Mellingham station. I say, hurry up, won't you?"

The chauffeur peered at his wrist watch and whistled.

"I shall have to," he said. "I'm afraid you won't do it, sir."

Talboyes quivered.

"I must," he cried. "And this lady must, even more than I must, though we both must about as much as anybody can m—— I say, get your car, do. It's—it's simply imperative."

The chauffeur buttoned his coat enthusiastically.

"I like a good old run for it meself," he stated. "I'll be with you in two shakes, sir."

He was as good as his word. In two shakes Lord Mellingham's proud limousine drew up alongside the insignificant and road-worn derelict of Hank Dipper. Talboyes, abject with exhaustion, transferred the luggage in safety; Mrs. Tavistock never releasing her secure grasp of the Gladstone bag. The limousine moved smoothly forward.

"Stella!" said Talboyes. "I believe we are saved."

"Talk to me in the train, dear Henry," she replied.

.

The early rays of dawn were illuminating the peaceful valley and unveiling the deep woods beyond. The miniature railway station, with its deserted yard and cow-shed, stood forlorn and silent, as though painfully aware of its own incongruity in the sweet pastoral landscape. Far down the valley a tiny cloud of smoke hovered on the still morning air, and from somewhere indefinite there echoed the distant sounds of an engine at a loss for steam and the dull clang of shunting trucks.

From a little cottage hard by the station yard, the bent figure of the aged porter came forth with the morning, like the familiar spirit of the place. He methodically unlocked and inspected the out-building in the yard, then, stumping moodily to the yard gate, he opened it and passed through to the cinder track which bordered the cow-shed. The torn fragments of a child's box-kite lay untidily in his path. Stooping with a grunt of exertion, he gathered them up and deposited them tidily beneath the seat in the shed. Unfastening the platform gate, he took up his position on the far side of it, gazing with a frown of anticipation down the line.

A distant signal fell with an accompanying swish

of wires. The porter nodded and drew his fingers across his nose with an air of satisfaction.

Into the harmony of peaceful meadows clanged the laborious discord of the Milk and Workmen. No workmen awaited it at Mellingham and few elsewhere. The title was probably an exaggerated tribute to the energy of the local sons of toil. But three milk-cans stood prepared to make their journey, and the porter, turning, inspected the labels they bore and rolled each can a few inches nearer the rails as the train steamed heavily towards him.

It arrived and drew up with a jerk which shook the whole line of vans by numbers. The engine blew forth a great volume of smoke like the breath of a giant halting in a race. The porter wheeled his milk-cans forward, pausing to interchange some time-honoured formula with the guard.

Slowing, slowly the stowing process was completed, and the guard, with an agonizing air of deliberate finality, drew the van door to.

Leaning half out of the window of the car, as it sped down the hill into the station yard, Henry Talboyes witnessed the scene with almost uncontrollable anguish. The chauffeur cocked a confident eye on the train and steadied the headlong impetus of the car. Did he not see that the guard was already making semaphore motions, whistle in mouth?

"Toot, toot!" shouted Talboyes. "Toot your hooter."

The chauffeur complied. The guard glanced round apprehensively and dropped his arms. The car performed its grating, semi-circular skid upon the cinders and pulled up.

A moment of preliminary agitation in the collection of baggage, and three figures rushed on to the platform; the chauffeur foremost carrying Mrs. Tavistock's belongings; next that lady herself, skipping lightly along, as a child skips for joy; in the rear Talboyes, at an encumbered trot, hugging in both arms his bag.

The chauffeur threw open the door of the nearest compartment to hand and placed his burdens within. As he stepped aside Mrs. Tavistock sprang nimbly after them. Along came Talboyes. He deposited his bag with studied care on the platform and fumbled at his breast pocket.

"Hurry up there, please," called the guard.

"All right, all right," replied Talboyes. "One m—— here we are."

He produced an oblong case containing Treasury notes.

"Ay, be you a-goin' be this yer train?" asked familiar voice at his side.

He shot a quick glance in its direction.

"Oh, ye gods!" he murmured. "Here, take this quickly, chauffeur."

"Thank yer, sir," said the chauffeur.

"Ay, Aa ain't seen your tickuts, ye know; ay, an' Aa'm gooin' ter see them tickuts——"

The whistle sounded. The engine responded with a preliminary heave resulting in a sullen din of vibrating milk-cans. Talboyes turned quickly. The porter was stooping menacingly over the Gladstone bag.

All the pent-up agitation in Talboyes found frenzied expression in one desperate moment.

"If you touch that bag," he cried, "I'll knock you down."

"Ay, them tickuts——"

Talboyes seized the bag and threw it into the carriage. Papers flew skimming under the seats. The train lurched forward. He jumped on to the moving footboard, stumbled, hung on, struggled into the carriage and swung the door to. The train slackened with a jerk. The porter's face appeared.

"Ay, this yer train doan goo——"

Talboyes pulled up the window. It was an ill-fitting window and immediately fell again with a crash.

"Doan goo——"

Talboyes pulled up the window. It fell.

"Doan goo ter London, ye know."

"I don't care where it goes," said Talboyes, "as long as it goes away from here."

"Ay, but them tick——"

Another jerk. The train moved forward, gathered speed. Reluctantly the porter released his hold of the door handle.

Mrs. Travistock was lying back in the corner seat, with her eyes closed. Her lips were parted in a little smile of bliss, the smile of one seeking rest after wearying pain. Talboyes sank beside her and laid his head on her shoulder. As he did so he started up again with a gasp.

On the hill-side, seen through the carriage window, the proud outlines of Mellingham Hall stood silhouetted in the grey dawn. Talboyes shrank from the sight, as though spellbound. The windows still blazed with lights, some fixed in a scandalized, bewildered stare, some flickering with the activities of outraged discovery. Above the methodical thud of the train his ears seemed to catch once more the blasting rattle of the jazz band, the dictatorial verbosity of the lordly host and the gratified bleating of his flock of tame guests, the sharp tone of Pauline, passing with callous rapidity from allurements to rebuke, the puzzled twang of her untimely husband; and a sudden, hideous medley of all these sounds raised in a cacophony of distracted wrath upon his fugitive head.

Then, with a scream of glad challenge, the engine of the Milk and Workmen bore gallantly round a steep bend of the track, and Mellingham Hall with its hundred lights vanished bodily from his sight— as in a dream.

THE END

